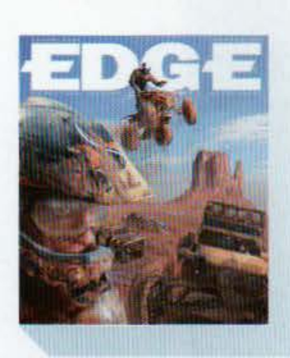


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Four years and five months ago, many of the people reading this magazine were sitting down to play their first ever game of *Halo*. Four years and five months ago, Oxford Street shoppers were watching in faint puzzlement as Nintendo locked mimes and contortionists in plastic boxes to promote the UK debut of its new console. Four years and five months ago, the air was full of speculation about price cuts, criticisms of launch line-ups, and prophesies of doom. But four years and five months is a very long time in the games industry – long enough to see both Xbox and GameCube to an early grave – and long enough for those debates to subside and a whole new generation of speculation and hysteria to take hold.

Launches are an exciting proposition, no doubt, and the pulse by which the games industry measures its progress, but they're also times when clarity and perspective are in short supply. And so, as Sony readies itself for lauch elsewhere in the world, we visit Evolution Studios and *Motor Storm* (p54) to get a real, hype-free insight into how ready the PlayStation 3 really is (and sneak a peek at the final debug hardware while we're at it). And on p62 we take a look back at the long history of hardware launches to assess their real significance and reflect on how quickly their quirks – from Frank Sinatra to attemped suicides, and pubic hair to green hot dogs – are forgotten.

Of course, May 2002 wasn't a date chosen at random. Four years and five months ago was also the last time **Edge** raised its cover price, and this issue inflation has finally caught up with us. But we're confident that you'll find it as valuable a read as ever, as we see how *Stranglehold* is measuring up to John Woo's explosive reputation (p50), examine the resurgence of co-operative gaming (p72), and revisit the happy incarceration of *Captive* (p94). And, in the Get Into Games supplement you'll find advice and information on how to turn your passion for gaming into a career. Who knows? In four years and five months time it might be your game on the cover.



EDGE

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"You're ambitious, Earl, but you'd be better off selling lady's undergarments in Hampstead."







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Every month



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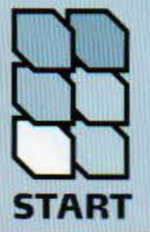
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Hype

Review







START


START
EIEF
Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival
G|C
GAMES CONVENTION
Where the culture of games takes centre stage
YAKUZA



EVENT

Conventional wisdom

After the news of E3's reduction, attention turns to Leipzig and Edinburgh to see two different models for game gatherings

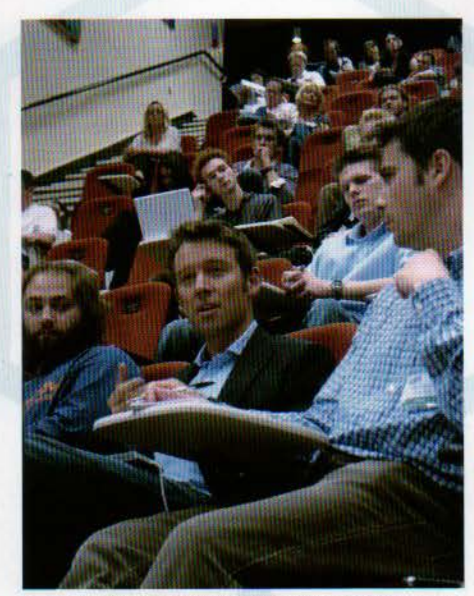
Nearly 200,000 people visited this year's Leipzig Game Convention. The attendees of the fourth Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival could – an unfortunate fire alarm was able to prove – comfortably huddle along a few yards of pavement. They may have taken place in the same week, and they may have both been distinctively European in flavour, but the two events could hardly have been more different.

The EIEF's brief – to provide a forum where the potential of gaming can be discussed away from the commercial clamour – was well served by its rather peculiar choice of venue. The steeply raked lecture hall of the Royal College of Physicians made it immediately clear to delegates that this was a place to learn, not a place to go over familiar industry ground. However, not all of the sessions managed to capitalise on that idea – David Garner (executive vice president of EA's worldwide studios) gave a charismatic keynote that touched on how games should change to attract more women players and how the industry should prepare for the changes that an increase in in-game advertising, user-created content and increasingly hostile legislation may bring. Nick Parker used his background as an analyst for Screen Digest to show many delegates up with his So You Think You Know Games session, which demonstrated that a rather worrying proportion of attendees thought that the *GTA* series had outsold the *Mario* games and that the PS2 was still the fastest selling console released in the UK. And, making good use of the setting, Ben Sawyer from the Serious Games initiative made his usual impassioned case for the recognition of games' capability to heal, whether by treating post-traumatic stress disorder or improving the training of medical staff.

What would designers come up with if they were given the cash to do what so many claim they dream of, game-making without commercial restraints?



Known as the oldest trade fair city in the world, Leipzig is still far from being stretched by the influx of game makers, distributors and players that GC entails. Home to the AMI and AMITEC motor transport fairs, its exhibition centre is an overly accommodating venue


The EIEF's setting at Edinburgh's Royal College of Physicians gave the sessions a somewhat scholarly air. Sadly, there wasn't enough opportunity to debate the more interesting implications of the wide range of gaming topics tackled by the various speakers

However, the session which best represented the event's agenda was that which centred on the PSP. Not Sony's handheld, but the concept of Public Service Publishing. Ofcom, the regulator of the UK's radio, telecoms and wireless communications has access to millions, and is starting a consulting process to examine the case for games to be publicly funded, as TV, radio and websites already are. It's a dynamite idea: what would designers come up with if they were given the cash to do what so many claim they dream of, game-making without commercial restraints? And what would games look like if they were subject to the requirement of public benefit that the BBC's





An absence of Wii did little to quieten the playground of Nintendo's stand. DS download stations and preview code pulled the crowds







With titles such as *Lair*, *Motor Storm*, and *Heavenly Sword* in the mix, Sony's trailer reel was stimulating enough to warrant a few minutes in the PS3 lounge (left). EA rebuilt its 360 degree videowall from E3 (right), but earned points for laying on code you could actually play

programming is? Ofcom is entirely open-minded about what format they might take (PC, console, mobile, browser-based) and about what ideas they might explore (as long as they fell within the concept of public benefit), which means that the potential is remarkable. There are months of work ahead before Ofcom can decide if this is the best way forward, and months more to iron out how it all might work, but the idea at the heart of it is simple, electrifying and would have been unimaginable ten years ago: the government wants to give people free money to make videogames.

Sadly, however, the session didn't feel electrifying. It was an entirely new idea for delegates to take in, and one whose implication required careful thought. Sandwiched in between other talks, with no time to digest and discuss with colleagues, most were underwhelmed by the idea. It's one of the problems that plagues the EIEF. If it follows its brief and tackles entirely new subjects then delegates may not be attracted in the first place, and may not be ready to absorb it when they get there. It was interesting to compare the reception to the session on machinima – very entertainingly presented by the Rooster Teeth team behind the Red Vs Blue *Halo* shorts – to that given last year. Twelve months ago, many attendees dismissed the idea as frivolous at best, pretentious at worst, and certainly irrelevant to their work. This year, with Rooster Teeth fresh from making The Strangerhood for *The Sims 2*, and recently retained by Vivendi to produce the PANICS promo for *FEAR*, machinima was suddenly clearly commercially viable and worth exploiting. It will be interesting to see if at EIEF07 Public Service Publishing is seen as a more pressing concern, and if the festival becomes better known for pointing the way for an industry which can often be surprisingly slow to pick up on what's happening in its own back yard.

With *Gears Of War* under wraps until X06, Microsoft moved titles such as *Viva Piñata* and *Flight Simulator X* to the fore, Rare's game being grossly misrepresented by a shaky demo

The second day of the festival decamped to another unexpected, but successful, venue – a cinema. Here, a series of screenings – open to the public and ranging from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Guitar Hero* – proved highly popular, with most screens full and snakes of queuing gamers winding back into the main foyer, which left high-ranking industry veterans rubbing shoulders with a passionate crowd of game students, fans and indie designers who were quick to take advantage of the chance to bend their ears. It gave the event a distinctive atmosphere, and brought it closest to feeling festive: for all its good intentions, and despite the setting, there's no escaping that the Edinburgh Interactive Games Festival has a long way to grow before it stops being a conference with big ideas and starts being an international focus for gaming ambition.

Meanwhile, 200km south of Berlin, Leipzig GC made light work of bringing together anyone inclined to attend, while also fulfilling that express condition that they sometimes be kept apart. A record turnout of public, press and trade did nothing to perturb the barrier attendants as



Despite the best efforts of the hosts, this year's EIEF missed the continuity and charisma of usual compere Clive Tilsley

they kept the business halls orderly, and routed those with the wrong coloured passes back into the organised chaos of the show floors. Five years old and still on the up, the combined consumer and trade fair is showing no signs of stress.

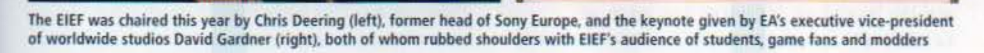
It was a tough year for the event, with expectations muddled by the recent announcements of the ESA, despite only three months having passed since E3 2006. But while some international reporters expressed bemusement at the lack of headline announcements, together with the predictable focus on mid-European market projections, Leipzig proved wise in staving off delusions of grandeur. For many – not least journalists suffering advanced states of Wienerschnizel-induced narcosis – the event seemed quite big enough already.

Of the inevitable controversies, none could hold a torch to those of E3. But each major console manufacturer drew flak for one reason or other, notably Sony for its lack of either press conference or PS3 hardware. As logical as it might have been to suspend announcements, rhetoric and demonstrations until TGS, the failure to even reproduce its E3 line-up engendered feelings of betrayal among few, but apathy among most. The lounge suite of sofas and 720p displays, each of which looped the same PS3 showreel, did much to ease the weary feet of GC explorers, but little to ease fears over Sony's ability to march out consoles. Having erroneously announced a year of 'next-gen exclusivity' for both *FIFA* and *PES* – Konami quickly rebuked the claim, stressing no exclusivity for the latter beyond Christmas – Microsoft stumbled again by showcasing a near-unplayable build of *Viva Piñata*. Nintendo, meanwhile, saved Wii demo units for its secluded press area, leaving DS titles only for public consumption.

Fighting valiantly – and successfully – for the attentions of 183,000 visitors, German publishers rolled out stage shows, booth babes and hands-on presentations

Recycled E3 stands from several major publishers dominated the four main halls, but for others this was the year's big marketing spend. Fighting valiantly – and successfully – for the attentions of 183,000 visitors, German publishers such as 10tacle rolled out stage shows, booth babes and hands-on presentations for all three public days. Representatives of the PC hardware industry were also out in force, capitalising on intense national interest for games such as Sunflowers' RTS *Paraworld*, the 10th anniversary release of *Settlers II* and the ubiquitous *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. If there was an issue with the show floors overall, it was the trade show configurations of some stands, big on props but short of breathing space for the overwhelming crowds. With luck, the demise of old-style E3 should ensure a better-suited environment for 2007.

And it's next year, of course, that both these events will really demonstrate their intentions. The organisers of Leipzig are already no doubt months into discussions about how their event will change – indeed if it will change – to reflect the vacuum that E3 has left behind. And for the EIEF, already up against the problem of an industry that loves the rhetoric of widening gaming's reach and raising its cultural, economic and social status but is often less keen to divert actual resources to the task, whatever changes happen to Leipzig will also effect it. Caught between the bedrock of the Edinburgh festival season and the hard competition of Leipzig's calendar-dominating event, there is no easy solution to the timing problems. But it's crucial that both events maintain their public focus. The gaming industry calendar is already clogged with opportunities for it to talk to itself: what the EIEF and Leizpig GC both show is the value of broadening those horizons and letting gamers and non-gamers, sceptics and enthusiasts get together and examine what games really have to offer the wider world.



The EIEF was chaired this year by Chris Deering (left), former head of Sony Europe, and the keynote given by EA's executive vice-president of worldwide studios David Gardner (right), both of whom rubbed shoulders with EIEF's audience of students, game fans and modders





This year's EIEF **Edge** award was won by *Brain Training*, and was received by Nintendo UK general manager David Yarnton. The inaugural EIEF **Edge** mobile award – voted for by readers of **Edge** Online – was won by Infospace's *Dirty Sanchez Party Games*



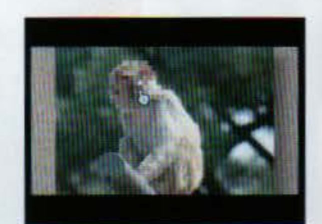

















Wii starts, PS3 stalls

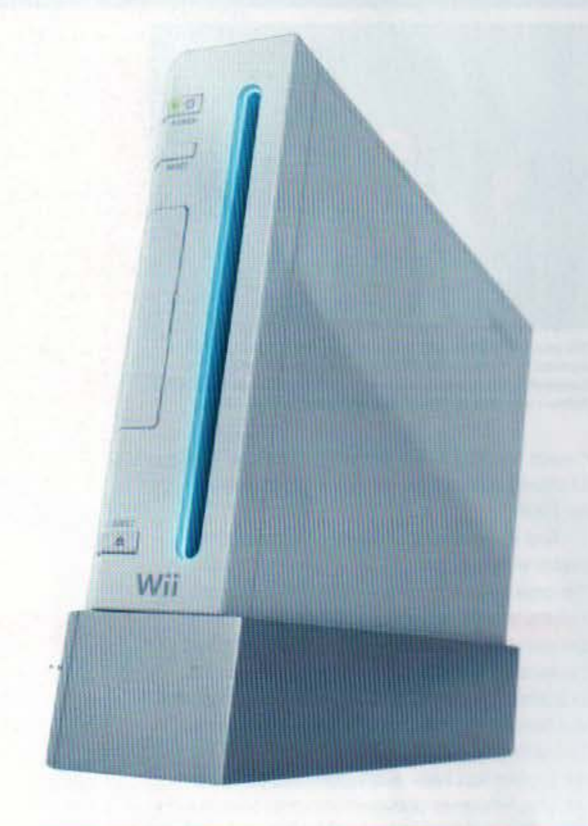
European PlayStation 3 launch delayed until March 2007, as Nintendo announces a near-simultaneous Wii release

Sometimes it's all about timing. Sony's announcement of a worldwide PS3 launch this November always sounded ambitious – although not as improbable as its original spring 2006 claims – so it was with an air of resignation rather than shock that Europe received the news that it wouldn't get its machines until next year. The decision is attributed to a shortage of the blue laser diodes needed for the machine's Blu-ray drive, and their scarcity has also resulted in Sony downwardly revising its unit availability estimates from four million machines at the year's end to just two million, of which 400,000 will be available for the US launch and just 100,000 for the Japanese debut. But the timing made Nintendo's announcements all the sweeter for Europeans: spread across three days of press conferences – NCL president Satoru Iwata's announcement in Tokyo, NOA president **Reggie Fils-Aime**'s in New York, and Nintendo of Europe's event in London (which occurred just after **Edge** went to press), the word broke that the Wii will debut, in white only, on November 19 in the US, at $250 (£135, bundled with one nunchuck controller combination and *Wii Sports*), on December 1 in Japan, at ¥25,000 (£115, with *Wii Sports* available separately at ¥2,200/£10), and most likely on December 8 in Europe, at £180 (with the same bundle as the US). Which means, for the rest of the world, Wii takes second place – two days after PS3 launch in the US, and three weeks after in Japan.

400,000 PS3s will be available for the US launch and just 100,000 for the Japanese debut. But the timing made Nintendo's announcements all the sweeter for Europeans

Details of the Virtual Console were also announced: ¥500/$5 (£3) for NES games, ¥800/$8 (£4) for SNES and ¥1,000/$10 (£5) for N64, and Iwata also confirmed the release of 60 Nintendo, Mega Drive and PC Engine games by the end of the year, and committed to ten new games a month for the service thereafter. Purchases will be made with Wii Points, which can be bought as cards, and presumably online. It's likely that the launch console bundle in each territory will include an amount of free Wii Points. As far as full retail titles go, Iwata was also able to confirm 16 launch titles (see boxout, far left) for the Japanese launch, which will go on sale at between ¥4,800 and ¥6,800 (£21-£30) and Fils-Amie was able to add *Excite Truck* to the US release list, where firstparty games will sell for $50 (£26)

Nintendo's other news was non-gaming related: the Opera browser will be available as a download, paid for in Wii Points, and allow what looks like free access to the internet. Satoru Iwata was able to demo a Google search during his Japanese press conference, but, knowing Nintendo, there will be substantial content-protection measures in place to safeguard younger users. The



Japanese Wii Launch Titles

No word yet on final lists for the UK or US, but here's what's in store for Japanese buyers

- Trauma Center (Atlus)
- Elebits (Konami)
- Machikuru Domino (Success)
- Necronesia (Spike)
- Super Monkey Ball (Sega)
- Swing Golf Panya (Tecmo)
- Wing Island (Hudson)
- Kororinpa (Hudson)
- SD Gundam Revolution (Bandai Namco)
- Ennichi no Tatsujin (Bandai Namco)
- Tamagotchi (Bandai Namco)
- Red Steel (Ubisoft)
- Wii Sports (Nintendo)
- Odoru: Made In Wario (Nintendo)
- The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Nintendo)
- Hajimete No Wii (Nintendo)









It's tempting to be dismissive of Wii's weather and news service channels, but it's easy to forget how many millions still rely on much slower and more limited teletext services















A red light for European PlayStation fans, as Sony admits, despite previous guarantees, that PS3 will be delayed until March 2007

Wii front-end will also offer a range of 'Channels' which provide weather and news report functions, as well as lifestyle tools like a calendar. A photo organiser and editor, with spectacular whirlwind- and waterfall-effect visual file sorting, allows images and video files to be uploaded from SD cards and displayed, as well as edited and adorned with the kind of 'stickers' and effects familiar from Japanese photo booths. It's clear the Remote is well suited to navigating and manipulating these kinds of applications; the weather map zooms out to reveal a globe which can be slicky spun, a quick prod forward can mark a date on the calendar, and webpages can be scrolled with ease.

Also revealed was Mii, Wii's custom avatar creation system, the fruits of which can already be seen in *Wii Sports*. Again, the speed and flexibility of the Remote comes into play, allowing for quickfire changes to moustaches, hairstyles and trouser colour, quickly creating models which have a timeless charm reminiscent of Lego figurines. It's not yet fully clear how widely Mii will be integrated into other Wii games, but its introduction raises interesting possibilities for managing friends lists and gamer profiles. Your avatar can be stored on the memory built into the Remote, and taken to a friend's house for multiplayer sessions. Wii Connect 24 will also provide a messaging system which, in Japan and the US at least, will provide messaging across Wii consoles, mobile phones and PCs.

As a fuller picture of Wii builds, it's a startling contrast to the Nintendo which for so long had remained suspicious of online potential, and closely wedded to the purity of play. With full online gaming to arrive with the launch of *Pokémon Wii Battle Revolution*, the Wii will be able to offer a full suite of internet access, messaging and information services, game downloads and online multiplayer. The question remains whether Nintendo's ambitions will be trumped when Sony unveils its full vision for PS3 at the upcoming Tokyo Game Show (see next issue for our full report), but for now, Fils-Aime's manifesto of "one price, one configuration, one colour" stands as a good representation of the contrast between the launches: one focused, straightforward and easy to understand; the other unquestionably more ambitious, but unquestionably more flawed.

OUT THERE



2,600 KEYCHAINS

The lesson learned here is that there's portable gaming, and then there's truly portable gaming. Making the Micro look even slightly bulky by comparison, Basic Fun has taken classic Atari gaming and put it truly in the palm of our hands with these Atari 2600 keychain remakes. The three models, two joysticks with either *Asteroids* and *Millipede* or *Centipede* and *Yar's Revenge* and one paddle containing *Pong*, *Breakout*, and *Warlords* have so far been released, each with a six-foot cable for a TV connection. Early hands-on reports from Atari purists have been disappointed to discover that they're not precisely Atari-age binaries, and singleplayer *Warlords* is a shadow of its true self, but at £8 a pop, they could ride on kitsch factor – not to mention endless 'pleased to see you' quips – alone.

• http://www.thinkgeek.com/geektoys/cubegoodies/80fc/

Cross talk

News emerges of revealing plans for PS3 network services



Through the unlikely medium of a Viacom second quarter earnings conference call comes word of a deal with Sony Online Entertainment to use their XFire game services tool to support *Untold Legends: Dark Brotherhood*, a key PS3 launch title. XFire, familiar to many PC gamers, offers tools like friends lists, server selection and lobby creation, as well as in-game messaging and voice chat. It also offers an online gamer profile tool, an idea now familiar to many Xbox Live Gamercard owners.

When word of the Viacom deal broke, the initial implication was that this XFire deal applied across all PS3 titles, and might therefore be integrated into the PlayStation Network Platform. This has since been denied by both XFire and Sony, who are keen to make clear that this deal is only confirmed for *Untold Legends*. Even so, it raises some interesting questions for PS3's online services across the board. If even SOE, a company built around the concept of online play, has decided to bring in an external company to manage these issues, how well will other companies fare? And what about XFire's other abilities, such as managing patches and updates? PC users know only too well how frustrating and fragmented their hobby can be. Here's hoping the arrival of XFire on PS3 isn't intended to solve as thorny a problem.



"We will happily go down that slippery slope. We'll put on skis."
Matt Soell from *Stubbs The Zombie* creator Wideload Studios pledges to overstep game humour's boundaries at the Austin Games Conference

"'Deposit quarter. Ball will serve automatically. Avoid missing ball for high score.' These are not just instructions, this is the strategy guide too."
Ex- Sony Online Entertainment chief Raph Koster looks back on a less complicated time

"I guess [I like playing] Alliance more than Horde."
Michael Dell, Dell founder and chairman, damns himself to the Kill On Sight lists of many a *World Of WarCraft* server

"If you asked me if Sony's strength in hardware was in decline, right now I guess I would have to say that might be true,"
Ken Kutaragi, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment muses on laptop battery recalls, Blu-ray shortages, and accusations of arrogance, after Sony's announcement of the delay to PlayStation3's European launch date

INTERVIEW

Game dev kung fu

Is the man behind Rag Doll Kung Fu about to revolutionise PS3 development?

Rag Doll Kung Fu, with its distinctive looks and innovative drag-to-move control scheme, made quick work of the journey from internet darling to sure-fire Steam hit. The brainchild of **Mark Healey**, at the time an artist at Lionhead, its success – which coincided with the sale of Lionhead to Microsoft – led him to break away with his main collaborators and form Media Molecule, a new game studio with small overheads and big ideas. Its first, so far unannounced project, has just been signed by Sony for PS3, and we spoke to Healey and co-founder **Alex Evans** about its genesis.

"Rag Doll showed to us that we could make something great, and it reminded us a lot of why we loved to make games, and it made us think we could try it on a larger scale"

How did the foundation of Media Molecule come about? Was it just one of those wild conversations that started to sound less and less wild?

Mark Healey: I think a lot of it came out of the success of *Rag Doll* – it showed to us that we could make something great, and it reminded us a lot of why we loved to make games, and it made us think we could try it on a larger scale.

Alex Evans: We'd formed this strong team at Lionhead and it just seemed liked a natural progression to start talking about new game ideas, and then suddenly we found ourselves in a position where we could do it. And we just thought, 'look *Rag Doll* was good, so let's just do the mad thing and jump ship'. I think it was in a car park in Guildford Priory. Mark and Dave [Smith, the third co-founder] and I had had lunch together, and we just decided that we would jump into the abyss. There wasn't really much of a plan, beyond that we knew could make it work, and since then it's gone amazingly, amazingly well.

How big a difference did the existence of things like Steam and Live Arcade make? Would you have been so keen to break away if there hadn't been these new avenues for getting independently developed games into people's hands?

MH: Probably we would have still been tempted, but if it wasn't for Steam, then *Rag Doll* wouldn't have been as successful as it was, and if *Rag Doll* hadn't been as successful, then I wouldn't have had the confidence to come and do this.

You're still a small team – around a dozen altogether. Were publishers sceptical when you approached them, because of the size of the company?

MH: Basically, they were persuaded by what we



Rag Doll Kung Fu was distinctive for its tone, its control scheme and its home-movie interludes. It's heartening that SCEE is ready to embrace all three on its new platform









Co-founders and *Rag Doll* veterans Mark Healey (below) and Alex Evans (below right), get cosy with the rest of the Media Molecule team (left)





had to show them – people have been really blown away by the game. And after that, when we tell them how many people are responsible, the emotions have ranged, to be honest. People who are used to large teams have been a bit worried, but basically we've proved that we can do a lot with a small number of people, so there's been no need for people to be alarmed.

How long did it take to put that prototype together?

AE: After we got together we worked for a very short period of time on some ideas and they were quite wild – we were quite worried, quite nervous about how they would be received. But I'd always believed that with a small team you can make a single platform really shine, rather than being a big team and going cross platform. The first people we went to see were Sony, and we were just blown away by how well they understood what we were trying to do. We were at a really early stage, but when we presented to Sony they just totally got it. We walked away completely surprised, because the bits we were most worried about – the weirder angles of the game – were the bits they most understood, and challenged us to extend them. And so we didn't need to go to anyone else because it was so clear that Sony understood, and obviously they're a platform holder and there aren't many of them around.

You seem very confident about working on PS3 with a small team. What do you make of the doom and gloom about the costs of PS3 development?

AE: We'd always thought that with a focused team you can do next-gen development, but we went to Sony initially not having ever seen a PS3 – no one had at the time – and now having used it for six months, I'm even more of that opinion. Now, that's not to say it's not hard – not just for PS3 but for all of next-gen – to deliver the polished, high-quality game that everyone is expecting, or that we've got magic fairy dust that means suddenly we can do stuff that no-one else can. But because we're new and fresh and single-platform, and don't have all that baggage of an old code-base, we were able to go, 'right, we'll take those hard things and turn them to our advantage'. That's where we're really hoping to distinguish ourselves, and so far it's gone really well – we take those things that people are running to the hills to get away from and just really embrace them. But we're absolutely going to grow. We're not going to stay at this size – I mean, what's considered small these days? A team of 30 would be considered small by many people – at the moment we're around 10-12, and we're in the middle of hiring – not so subtle plug! – because when we say small we're thinking in terms of 20 or 30, not five or two.

Is there anything at all you can say about the new project?

MH: We are sworn to secrecy, but ...there are definitely some important lessons that we learned from Rag Doll. And we're definitely going to use the tilt control as much as possible, although what we're making is still effectively a game you play with a joypad. But there was a lot of stuff that happened in the development of Rag Doll, there was a certain spirit which prevailed across the community there. And that's probably one of the biggest influences in what we're doing now. It's definitely going to stand out.

AE: What I can say is that people just really get it, as soon as they pick it up. You can describe it in words, and people say 'oh, that sounds interesting', but then you put it in their hands and they're like, 'oh my god, I see what you mean.' That's what's really exciting.



OUT THERE

1000 MANIACS

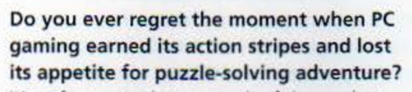
There's already something strangely alluring about watching a skilled game replay video, but multiply the players by a thousand and suddenly you've elevated it to a near artform. Truly the Bravia advert of replays, sMull's 1K Project II, a three minute compiled replay of 1000 simultaneous Trackmania Sunrise playthroughs alternates between highlighting liquid streams of overlapping cars and then sudden spraying into a thousand gleaming auto-droplets. It's certainly one of the most hypnotic game videos we've seen in recent memory, and already a verified internet phenomenon, and could even be appreciated as a study on the divergent styles of individual players, if you can wrench your mind out of its groove for a split second.

● http://www.gametrailers.com/umwatcher.php?id=12321



Knight moves

From shining star to guiding light, an adventuring legend returns



Having co-founded casual game distributor Oberon Media in 2003, designing in the process several of its bite-sized puzzle games, **Jane Jensen** is heading back to her roots with *Gray Matter*, a point-and-click adventure due in late 2007. But while her passions for game design and fiction writing must have seemed perfectly paired during *Gabriel Knight*'s heyday, times (or technologies, at least) have changed. Can this new title really be that simple?

Can you give us an introduction to Gray Matter?

It's been exactly ten years since I conceived the first *Gabriel Knight* game, so the chance to do a brand new series really made me think about what would be fresh now. Since *Gabriel Knight* we've had X-Files, Buffy The Vampire Slayer, Ghost Whisperer, and a lot of series in the same vein. I wanted to think about what constituted cutting-edge paranormal – this series questions more the nature of reality and the powers of the mind.

Have games forgotten how to do sci-fi and fantasy?

Well, you can take a shooter or a military game and set it in space, but it isn't science-fiction. That genre was originally much more literate, much more about visualising the future or representing our current conditions allegorically.

"The people who like to play adventure games don't want to navigate in a 3D space. It's about exploring a world; it needs to be compact but visually compelling"



One of *Gray Matter*'s more traditional object hunts is still partially disguised by its theme: Styles must rebuild his memory through flashbacks triggered by key items in the house

Do you ever regret the moment when PC gaming earned its action stripes and lost its appetite for puzzle-solving adventure?

It's unfortunate that so much of the market that action games don't appeal to has been disenfranchised. But the adventure game is re-emerging in Europe, and hopefully that will translate over. People are also getting tired of the same old thing, and at this point it's the adventure that's looking fresh.

Would you say that point-and-click needs to evolve, or does it actually need to learn how to stay as it was?

I definitely think that realtime 3D is a mistake. We did that with *Gabriel Knight 3* and I think we did a pretty good job with the textures, but the people who like to play adventure games don't want to navigate in a 3D space. It's about exploring a world and its details; it needs to be compact but visually compelling, and pre-rendered graphics serve that end a lot better. We definitely can't go back to, say, *King's Quest IV*, a pre-VGA adventure where you type, things sparkle, and sometimes they become impossibly frustrating. But neither is it about these roadblocks where puzzles that have nothing to do with the story are just thrown in. And another problem with 3D is that a lot of it's just bad art.

Do you exert much influence over the art in Gray Matter?

Well, I'm acting as the director so I have creative control over everything. It's really important to have a vision behind a project, just as an independent film director will have a vision. With this one especially, as the team isn't in the US, I need to stay with it throughout and make sure it feels like a *Gabriel Knight* game would do.

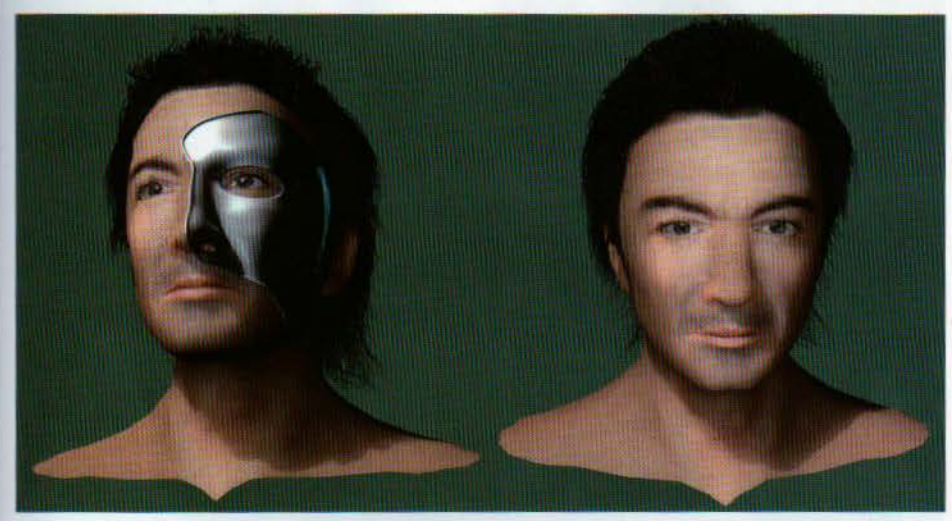
Newswire



Atari struggles on

September's announcement of a new president and CEO at Atari – industry veteran David Pierce – was marred as a deadline for improved NASDAQ share prices passed, with prices failing to break $1 for over ten consecutive business days, and the rejection of an appeal to the Listing Qualifications Panel which will see parent company Infogrames Entertainment SA delisted. The French stock exchange then suspended the company's listing in anticipation of a debt restructuring plan that aims to reduce Infogrames' outstanding debt from £116 million to £16 million through short-term loan extensions and the issuing of free share warrants.





Crisp display resolutions and 3D rendering technology should, if everything goes to plan, eliminate much of the pixel-hunting that once plagued the point-and-click. As this month's *Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death* proves, however, that can be a difficult habit to overcome

So we can assume you're not a fan of design-by-committee.

When I worked at Sierra it was a golden era, which I didn't recognise at the time. The brilliant thing about that company was that [Sierra's founder] Ken Williams wouldn't easily give out chances to design a game, but once he had he believed that it needed to be your game. If it didn't sell then you would never make another game for Ken Williams, but he'd never fool around with it during production. That's how you came to have work such as [*Leisure Suit Larry* creator] Al Lowe's and the *Space Quest* series – games with a voice.

Have you been following the evolution of Broken Sword?

I have, actually. The first one came out at the same time, roughly, as *Gabriel Knight*, and I did look at the third one, though I didn't play the whole thing. It's the gum-on-the-horsehair-on-the-whatever kind of puzzles.

The vogue for several upcoming projects is to have the player shape rather than follow the story. Could the point and click adventure support such open-ended design?

Well, I'm ultimately a storyteller, and as such I think I have a power belief that there's a story there, and that story has an ending. If everyone was a great storyteller then we wouldn't have writers, so ultimately somebody wants you, the craftsman, to take them on a journey. Not that there isn't space for wide open games, or indeed opportunities within story-driven games for wide interactivity.

Is it the old case of being so enamoured with the possibility that you forget the practicality?

Well, it goes through cycles, doesn't it? There's a period during which the concept's popular, but then somebody spends hours online being shot in the back by twelve year olds and they realise that maybe having unlimited freedom isn't all that much fun.



Altered estate

For psychological horror, there's no place like a stately home

Gray Matter **unites familiar Jensen enthusiasms for science, the occult and the subconscious. Lead character is Oxford neurobiologist David Styles, widowed by a freak car crash that's left him a recluse, committed to investigations of the human mind. One charts the effects of imagined activities on the bodies of six students: if you picture yourself jogging, for instance, do you actually feel the benefit? The other sees him locked in an isolation tank, trying to reach his dead wife. Aided by second playable character Samantha Everett, a sceptical drifter, street performer and magician, he faces a series of bizarre events at Dread Hill House, his campus and home. How supernatural his experiments become is for the player to discover. Is he actually trying to perpetrate some big hoax, or is somebody trying to take advantage of his damaged state of mind?**



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Outside of a handful of more famous cases – some of the dealings of early console manufacturers against unlicensed software, or patent settlements – the law within gaming goes largely overlooked.

Not so with Canadian law firm Davis & Company LLP, which has devoted an entire blog to the subject. Reporting on recent issues and case law as well as a wide variety of related issues. It's both informed and insightful on matters dating back decades. For a case in point, see the dedicated Case Law Table, which summarises battles from Wilson vs Midway Games, citing *Mortal Kombat* for inspiring a murder, all the way back to Nintendo's famous case against Universal Studios over the use of their title *Donkey Kong*.

Site:
Video Game Law Blog
URL:
www.davis.ca/community/blogs/video_games



COMPETITION

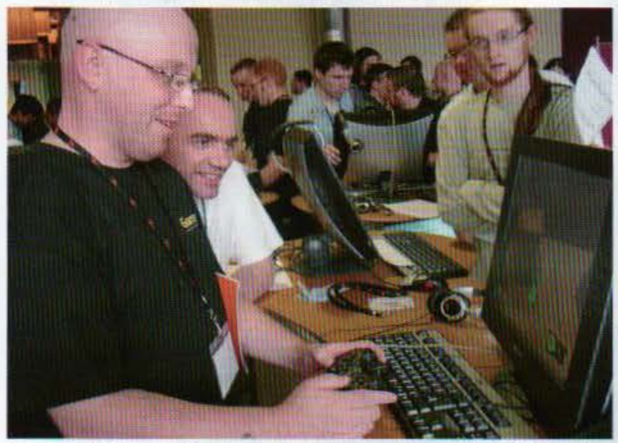
Dare to expand

Scottish student game competition Dare To Be Digital gears up to go nationwide

The University of Abertay Dundee's student game making competition, Dare To Be Digital, completed its seventh year with the strongest batch of prototypes yet. But while the teams from Scotland, Ireland, Northern Ireland and Canada take a well-earned rest and consider future plans, it's full speed ahead for the organiser.

Their goal for 2007's event is to establish at least four regional hosting centres throughout the UK and Ireland. "We want to ensure there's a centre reachable by any talented individual or team in the UK," explains **Paul Durrant**, Abertay's director of business development.

Each of these centres will host up to six teams for a nine-week period between June and August, providing the opportunity for students to turn game concepts into working prototypes. The teams will be chosen from a paper-based application process for each region; something due to take place in the spring. In terms of Dare 2006, for example, a total of 24 teams applied for the seven available places. It's planned that 2007's competition will climax with the games from all regional teams brought together in one location for a public vote, with the top six then going before a final industry judging panel in Dundee.



The results of the ten week development process were made available at the University of Abertay Dundee, with staff from companies such as EA, Rare, Codemasters and Denki



Durrant is under no illusions about how ambitious this plan is, however: "Most people underestimate the challenges involved," he says. One issue for each centre will be providing 30 industry-standard PCs with non-academic software licences of the various 3D art packages and coding tools required. Funding is another. Just in terms of wages, it costs around £7,000 to fund each team, and there are plenty of other factors.

"University living accommodation is required for non-local teams," Durrant adds. "This could be tricky in areas where universities generate letting income in the summer." Mentors are needed in each location during the nine-week period to advise teams.

But with an increasing focus in both governmental and education circles on encouraging creative industries and technical skills, the rewards of pulling off such an event are obvious, for Abertay, Dare's future partners, and the UK games industry in general.

Durrant says he hopes the expansion will also allow the competition to expand from its current focus on highlighting talent for hire, to providing more of an opportunity for the development of original intellectual property.

Fred Hasson, CEO of European development tradebody Tiga, and one of this year's Dare judges, certainly thinks the competition has potential: "The two most important issues for UK and European development are the refining of skills, and the ability to continue to create new intellectual property in terms of technology and content," he says. "Dare To Be Digital is playing a massively important part in these areas."

It's not just in the UK where this model is being used either. The most famous example is Valve's *Portal* game, which started life as *Narbacular Drop*, a final year project from students at the DigiPen Institute of Technology in Redmond. Released as







Left: Dare 2006 featured teams from Scotland, Ireland, Canada and Northern Ireland, with the team from the latter winning the award for best use of technology for its game, *Gal-Ex*. Right: One of the success stories of Dare in recent years is Ramba Studios' *Primary Steps*

freeware, the team behind the game has since been employed by Valve.

One team from Dare 2005 already fulfilling the mandate to establish new companies is Ramba Studios. Its education game *Primary Steps* won the award for the product with greatest market potential, and despite losing one member to the demands of full-time employment, the rest of the team have continued to hone the product within University of Abertay Dundee's incubator program.

"We are getting a lot of interest, so I'm hoping to engage regional development agencies to support Dare. It will be a high level political sell,"

The four founders have been accepted into Nesta's Creative Pioneer program, which offers support for early stage creative companies set up by graduates. They have also received direct funding from Nesta, with the launch for the school-based synthetic phonics-based learning product due in November.

"Setting up our company was a result of doing Dare," says team leader **Bruno Frayling-Kelly**. "Before the awards were announced, we had decided that we would give it a shot. We felt we worked well together and that our idea could be made into a successful, commercial product. Winning the product with greatest market potential award cemented this idea. It really was a now or never decision. If we had waited and had got jobs in the industry, we wouldn't have been able to leave to start the company."

Breaking into industry as a team with original IP remains extremely difficult, as previous winners of Dare have found out. Winners back in 2002 with its detective noir game *Gumshoe*, the doors of developer Hiding Buffalo have recently closed. Publishers weren't interested in taking on the project as an standalone game so it became a web-based episodic adventure, which is still available at www.gumshoe-online.com. But despite reaching 25,000 registered users, it didn't generate sustainable revenues for the company. Another Dare team, Caveman Arts, completed mobile games for Kuju in 2004 before closing.

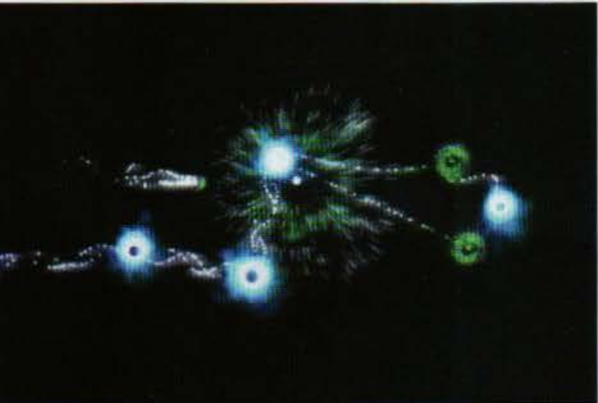
Clearly widespread support will be required from both inside and outside the games industry to bring Dare's 2007 plans to fruition.

"We are getting a lot of interest, so I'm hoping to engage the Department for Culture Media and Sport, and the Department of Trade and Industry into taking a UK-wide view of encouraging regional development agencies to support Dare. It will be a high level political sell," Durrant explains.

And for its own part, Abertay is putting resources where its mouth is with a six figure sum already invested in setting up an organising team consisting of four fulltime members to work with Durrant.

Winner of the Dare award for most market potential was *Metalheads* (below) a game with gesture-based gameplay designed for the DS touchscreen. Bottom: winner of the award for greatest innovation and creativity was *Flux*, a music-based game which can be played either with a mouse or waving a controller around, in the style of the Wii Remote





This year's model

What the latest contest brought to gaming

The games of Dare 2006 were characterised by a return to core features, with none of the focus on learning, mobile or co-operative games of previous years. If there was one sub-trend however it was the affect of Nintendo hardware on student minds, which resulted in a couple of games employing novel control methods.

Most notable were *Metalheads*, with its emulation of a DS touchscreen, and *Flux*, a game involving gesture control which could just about be handled using a Wii Remote-type controller, both won major awards: *Metalheads* for best market potential and *Flux* for greatest innovation and creativity. The games also used middleware technology from emerging Irish provider Instinct Technology.

"Dare's helped in a lot of ways," says Tommy Millar, leader of the *Metalheads* team. "I've appreciated the value of continuous hard work, and how important a co-operative, enthusiastic team can be. The chances to talk to individuals from the industry has given us all a greater knowledge of how to design, develop and market videogames, and we now feel ready to undertake a full project."

Gavan Acton, team leader of the *Flux* team was equally enthusiastic. "The reason I entered Dare is it's a one-in-a-kind opportunity. You get to take your own game, your own ideas and develop them for ten weeks with your friends."

Both teams are looking to build on their Dare experience and see how much further they can take their protoypes. Even Jonathan Halkett, leader of the *Electolyte* team, was pleased with the experience, despite not picking up any prizes. "Right now we're finishing off a version of our game that will be available on the web," he says. "Then it'll be a matter of showing it to anyone who wants to see, getting jobs or who knows."

And as for any advice for next year's teams, Halkett says enjoy yourself. "The main thing you take away from Dare is the experience. Being involved in a fast-paced project has you either stressing or smiling. But one things for sure, by the end you'll love making games just as much as playing them."





Almost all the machines on display are playable, though visitors should expect lengthy queues for the more popular cabinets

EVENT

Science Museum plays favourites

Game On provides a second chance to examine the history of a future-obsessed industry

Late October brings with it the opportunity to see the work of Charles Babbage and Nolan Bushnell collected under one roof. *Computer Space*'s unmistakable curved fibreglass body will stand on display just rooms away from the brass fittings of the Difference Engine as Game On, an interactive exhibition exploring the history of videogame culture, returns to London for a season at the Science Museum.

Originally exhibited at the Barbican in 2002, before a stint at the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and then tours of Europe and North America, Game On features more than 100 classic and modern videogames, all of which visitors are free to play. Gems amongst the collection are an iconic yellow *Pong* machine (less rare but far more approachable than its elder sibling *Computer Space*), and an original *Donkey Kong*. While there's far from an exhaustive list of machines on display, the chance to play games like *Tempest*, *Space Invaders* and *Defender* on their original hardware will be worth the price of admission on its own to many. "Nowhere else will people be able to see the entire history of the games industry laid out, explained, and ready to play," says **Gaetan Lee**, the Science Museum's programmes developer.

Gems amongst the collection are an iconic yellow Pong machine (less rare but far more approachable than its elder sibling Computer Space), and an original Donkey Kong

Nostalgia aside, Game On strives to balance the action with insight. The surprise star of its Barbican showing in 2002 was a selection of testimonies about the power of games taken from a surprisingly varied range of players. This feature returns in spirit as a new work created by the artist Jon Burgerman (the man behind the Burgertown track for *Wipeout Pure*'s downloadable Omega pack), that takes the form of a scribbled timeline of gaming memories sent in by members of the public. And while the choice of venue may suggest that many still see videogames as slotting more comfortably into the sciences rather than the arts, the exhibition itself manages to explore the industry's history and culture as well as its technology, taking time to examine the different influences of Japan, North America and Europe, as well as the wider relationship between cinema, music and gaming, and a backstage look at the development process.

The fact that videogames have made it to such a cherished national institution is reason enough for celebration in itself. Until now, the highlight of their existing game exhibits was an astonishingly un-yellowed SNES in the Making The Modern World gallery. Sponsored by Nintendo, which also invested in the museum's new Launchpad gallery, Game On runs from October 21 February 25, and should provide visitors with a genuine insight into the ways in which games are changing – as well as a crippling sense of nostalgia and a painful case of *Pac-Man* finger.



Atari's *Computer Space* (far left) may have looked beautiful, it was the simpler *Space Invaders* (above) which made a bigger splash. Jon Burgerman's gaming timeline (excerpt, top right), looks set to dominate the exhibition with its charistmatic style



Steve Russell's *Spacewar* running on the PDP-1 marks the start of Game On's journey through the history of videogames. Nearly 50 years after its creation, games are getting to grips with physics

Newswire



iPod plays around

Apple's rumoured move into the downloadable games market bore its first fruit this month, with the iTunes store offering $5 titles for fifth-generation iPods. Several will be familiar to Live Arcade users, including *Bejeweled*, *Zuma*, and *Pac-Man*, plus Apple's own version of *Texas Hold 'Em*. The move potentially puts the iPod into more direct competition with Microsoft's Zune, though details of game support there remain scant. The new iPods retain the wheel interface, suggesting media player functionality to be the main focus. More dedicated development, however, could create an interesting market for bespoke games.





AWARDS

BAFTA goes BAVGA

The British Academy announces the nominees for its third videogame awards ceremony

Oblivion, Psychonauts, GRAW and Tomb Raider: Legend are among those up for for best screenplay, while Just Cause, Black and Shadow Of The Colossus, plus others, could walk away with a technical achievement BAVGA

Back in March, BAFTA announced its recognition of videogames as an increasingly important part of the culture of entertainment, equally deserving of the acknowledgement given to film and television. Come October 5, it'll be putting its awards where its mouth is. Known as the British Academy Video Game Awards, it's part of the London Games Festival, to be hosted by Vernon Kay.

Awards will be given out in a total of 17 categories, a broad sweep that includes innovation, artistic achievement, screenplay, simulation, multiplayer, technical achievement and casual and social, a list that also pays dues to the many aspects of videogame sound design: soundtrack, audio and original score.

The nominees represent an equally far-reaching group, from *Trauma Center: Under the Knife* to *C-130 Hercules*, *Rogue Trooper* to *Electroplankton*. One of the most popular is *Loco Roco*, which appears a total of eight times, an accolade shared with *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*. Meanwhile, *New Super Mario Bros* goes up against *Daxter*, *Lego Star Wars II*, *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown*, *We Love Katamari* and, of course, *Loco Roco* in the bid to win what must be one of the most eclectic children's categories to have ever been put forth by a high-profile awards body. A



complete list can be found at www.bafta.org – a collection whose common denominator would appear to be critical success; now it's down to gamers to keep their fingers crossed that their own favourites continue to reap praise.

Continue

Being European
The Wii before Christmas? Not much of a surprise

Old Live Arcade
Scramble, *Time Pilot*: instant, cheap nostalgia

Pass the pad
The best multiplayer games are singleplayer

Quit

Being European
PS3 delayed till 2007? Not much of a surprise

New Live Arcade
When will the drought of new *new* titles end?

Edit Canis Canem
Clumsy and craven, the result of bullying *Bully*

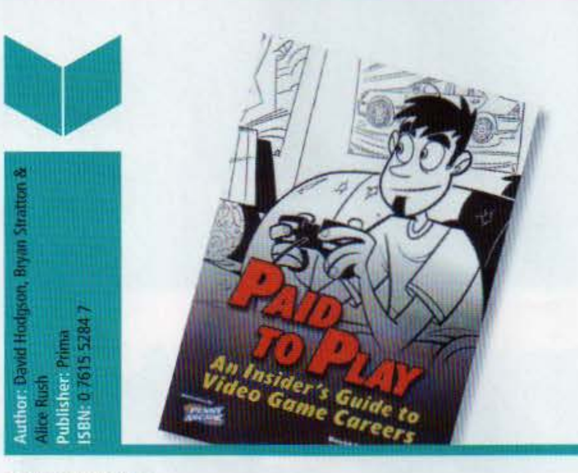


Author: Jacob Habgood & Mark Overmars
Publisher: Apress
ISBN: 1 59059 615 3

THE GAME MAKER'S APPRENTICE

Forget the professionals; get your hands dirty with this introduction to game making

Everyone wants to be a creator these days. Schoolkids sketch out their debut movies in media studies, uploading the resulting carnage to YouTube. Punk bands are conquering the world via MySpace. So what about games? That's where The Game Maker's Apprentice comes into play. A collaboration between one-time Gremlin coder and now PhD student Jacob Habgood and Utrecht University professor Mark Overmars, the book and companion CD provides all the encouragement and resources you'll need to take your first steps up the development ladder. The foundation is provided by Overmars' Game Maker. This drag-and-drop Windows package means games can be built without any overt use of programming languages, although there is an in-built scripting language for more advanced users. It's Habgood's research work with kids that informs the pace of instruction however. Most of the chapters are written around the process of making a simple game, with tutorials interspersed with more general comments about how actions will affect the finished game. And as well as all the art and audio resources being provided on the CD, completed games are also available in a native form so you can delve into them if you get really stuck during an exercise. But of course, the point of the book is to teach the basics and let your imagination run free. Any finished creations can be uploaded and shared via Overmars' website http://gamemaker.nl



Author: David Hodgson, Bryan Stratton & Alice Rush
Publisher: Prima
ISBN: 0 7615 5284 7

PAID TO PLAY

Another attempt to inform the career path of wannabe game developers falls short

The phrase 'paid to play' is a bane of most game journalists' lives as the first response you get when conversing about your job in polite society. It also seems to be something that can be applied to the entire industry, if Prima's latest 'How To Get Into The Industry' book is to be believed. To be honest though, any naive assumptions you might have about how much fun a career in games could be will be rudely interrupted by reading this book. Jauntily pitched in tone somewhere between a jokey juvenility and downright painful, it's also an incredibly dense read, with huge amounts of insider information packed into what should be seemingly straightforward passages. This isn't helped by the fact the book is based on over 100 interviews with people currently working in the industry, the majority of whom don't seem to have anything to say other than the conventional 'work hard, play hard'. Equally, the boxout-heavy design and lack of illustrations – Penny Arcade's chapter headings aside – doesn't help much either. As a useful text for dipping into, Paid To Play may go down well in US college libraries though. All the usual job descriptions from design, to art, coding, producing, audio, QA, publishing and even lateral strikes like journalism and professional gaming are covered, plus advice on how to write a CV and handle an interview. Still, this feels more like an opportunity missed than something that demystifies an industry which suffers from more than its fair share of working myths.

Space Giraffe [working title]

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Or "Space Giraffe and nothing whatsofucking ever to do with old 80s computer systems," as one of the sheepie whore's recent forum posts proposed. Beyond its title, Jeff Minter's Live Arcade shooter's primary concern is balancing its lightsynth psychedelia with the crucial visual cues of a fast-paced, multi-plane shooter

Battlefield: Bad Company

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



Rather than redraft the lacklustre singleplayer mode of *Modern Combat*, DICE has given its AI a mission all of its own. Putting you in charge of a firstperson rag doll, susceptible to whiplash and other Havok-inflicted trauma, it wants to take the robotics out of FPS action. Other examples: dynamic recoil and reticule sway

Devil May Cry 4

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



It'll be here sooner than you think, with visuals entirely in keeping with what you'd expect. Set in the post-*DMC* city of Fortuna, with the fresh-faced Nero at the helm, it introduces a demon grapple for pulling enemies into the path of ambitious combos. Versus choreographer Yuji Shimomura reprises his role

Forza Motorsport 2

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Pulled at the last minute from the Leipzig conference for build quality reasons, 360's exclusive owners club seems determined to make a better first impression than its predecessor did last year. An online photo mode and accelerator-focused handling are the main changes, with Drivatars and multiplayer modes enhanced

Wario Ware: Smooth Moves

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



By categorising the grips, postures and movements of freehand control into examples such as The Dumbbell, The Chauffeur, The Remote Control, The Sketch Artist and The Umbrella, this either overcomplicates the previous games' reflex challenge or adds an invigorating new dimension. We're tilting towards the latter

Ridge Racer 7

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Fuelling suspicion that *RR6* was the nightly build to the PS3 sequel's milestone, Namco drifts further than ever into online territory, passing several landmark features of *PGR3* en route. Only one player worldwide can rank as *The* Ridge Racer, while drift and nitro tuning options give others a chance to catch up

Pirates Of The Burning Sea

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** VALVE



A treasure chest of MMO design innovations, Flying Lab's visit t the 16th century Caribbean is fast garnering the buzz it deserve A stored labour economy promises to alleviate the grind, while the realtime naval combat has Sid Meier well within its sights. DX9 visuals also feature, courtesy of Activision's Alchemy engin

Silent Hill Origins

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



An over-the-shoulder camera, *RE4*-style action bias and a new blockade system – scenery can be used to guard against enemie – are mere tweaks next this handheld prequel's big departure: i being developed at Climax. Input from Konami's Team Silent should keep it focused, but uninspiring art direction is an issue

Ryu Ga Gotoku 2

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Sega has done a sterling job in taking Kazuma Kiryu so far from Kamurocho in so little time, with this second dance in the PS2 twilight already said to be over 80 per cent complete. New co-o attacks, freer combo transitions, more minigames and a deeper storyline suggest this tour of Osaka to be a worthy successor

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Dwarf Fortress

http://www.bay12games.com/dwarves/

If there's one genre you wouldn't expect to make a comeback in 2006, it's the *Rogue*-alike, but against all odds it has. The end-product of four years of labour, and still at alpha, *Dwarf Fortress* is Bay 12 Games' answer not just to *Nethack*, but a good amount of *Dungeon Keeper* as well. Split into two separate modes – Adventure, still obviously the most unrefined in its alpha state, and Fortress mode – it's an immense undertaking, which you'll soon realise within the half-hour it takes to initialise your unique persistent world.

By either focusing on tunnelling out and managing your own dwarven haven and keeping both invaders and the cruel winter at bay, or setting forth to explore its sprawling lands and achieving Legendary status in the more classic *Rogue* sense, the next thing you'll realise is how brutal its ASCII renditions are, with battles described in limb-snapping detail.

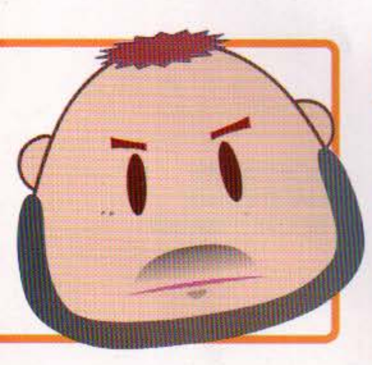
It's not the most accessible game we've ever recommended – be prepared to devote hours to first settling into its rhythms – but certainly one of the most ambitious and accomplished.

Genji 2, Devil May Cry 4, Formula 1 PS3 and The Getaway PS3: all with big names and big budgets

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

The new reality

Game producer Brick Bardo on the console arms race



In Japan, we have a very popular TV series called Ultra Seven. It is the story about a member of the 'Ultra Terrestrial Defense Force' which fights monsters coming from outer space. He is no ordinary guy and can transform into a 40-metre-tall giant, a 'Moroboshidan'. This TV programme is from almost 40 years ago, and only a few dozen episodes were ever made, but it is still very popular now and is often repeated on TV. There is not a single Japanese person who doesn't know its name. There is a famous line spoken in one of them that translates as something like: "It's a sad marathon you run while spilling blood." In the episode it comes from, Earth had fired a missile at a planet which was supposed to not to be inhabited. The planet was in fact inhabited, the missile was seen as an attack and the planet started to send monsters to Earth.

The dialogue I quoted above was a symbol of its time. Ultra Seven was made in the middle of the Cold War, and the line was criticising the meaningless development of weapons of mass destruction. Despite being an entertainment TV series, it was filled with deeper messages.

Recently, I have had the chance to meet new people in the games industry. They are not famous or stars, 'just' young designers and programmers. And they all express worries.

I have mentioned these worries before, things like "Will the PS3 sell?" or "Where is the industry going?" Everybody agrees that the PS3 offers plenty of features, but with such a very high price tag, will it sell? Even those who are developing games are still wondering if they will buy the machine at launch, just because of its price. On top of that, the explosion in the cost of development for the PS3 is a big worry for these young developers. Those working at a very basic level in a team are generally working without knowing the true cost of their project. But it is not difficult to see that, because of the number of staff involved and the time taken to develop a game, it is costing several billion yen. Big game makers are putting together projects which remind me of *Shenmue* because of the huge budget involved.

It is said that a game released at PS3 launch becomes profitable when it manages to sell around 10 per cent of the current number of active PS2 units – but let's face it, this is unlikely to happen. It can't be profitable

Lately the PS2 was reported to have reached the 100 million units shipped mark worldwide, and this figure is the result of six years of very successful sales. Since some people have replaced their broken one or bought a new model, let's assume that there are about 60 to 70 million working units worldwide. It is said that a game released at PS3 launch only becomes profitable when it manages to sell around 10 per cent of the current number of active PS2 units – but let's face it, this is unlikely to happen. It can't be profitable. I mean we are talking about around 70 million PS2s sold over six years and we have to sell 10 per cent of this number on day one for the PS3, just to become profitable...

Hearing someone say: "We are just making this game to get some experience so we can aim at profitability with the next one" is not unusual, and



New versions of *Call Of Duty*, *Gran Turismo*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Tekken* are all planned for PS3. The reliance on bankable franchises is an inevitable part of a new hardware launch, but how many copies will their publishers need to sell to turn a profit? And how many PS3s will Sony need to sell to do the same?

could lead some developers to leave their company. While it is true that gaining experience on new hardware is very important, it is almost impossible to do at the moment. What is the point of doing that and betting on the next project if the company folds before it is released?

The gameplay factor aside, making games is about investing time, and of course a large amount of money, in hiring skilled staff and greatly improving graphics. And if this is done to deliver the vision of a game creator, then why not? However, I believe some companies are motivated to release a game just because a new platform is launched, and it looks like they are advancing into a thick fog. The common opinion among developers is that there are enough users out there to make games profitable, but I'm not sure users are that interested in great graphics.

I really can see the games industry running that sad marathon and spilling their blood. But we need to carry on even if we have to spit blood or even if companies have to face hard times, and rather than going for original content, this means continuing with popular series and putting popular licences into games. Crazy!

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Yoshi's Island 2



It's impossible to shake the suspicion that it just won't be able to measure up, but it's just as impossible not to yearn for its colourful, crayoned chaos
DS, NINTENDO

Resistance: Fall Of Man



It may not quite have captivated at E3, but the distinct palette and malign imagination of *Resistance* makes it look more like the jewel in the PS3's crown as the weeks go by
PS3, SCEA

Indiana Jones 2007



Standing (throwing, staggering, tumbling) as one of the first real contenders to revolutionise next-gen gameplay, who isn't curious to see if Dr Jones can measure up?
360, PS3, LUCASARTS

Eating their words

Is the games industry fighting fit?



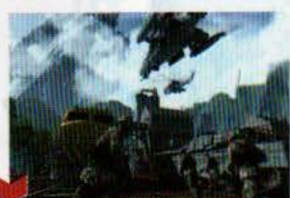
The pressure put on *Bully*, now *Canis Canem Edit*, applied in some cases by people who were open about the fact that they knew nothing about the game ('you can tell what it's like from their other games' was the rationale – not big fans of *Table Tennis*, then) shows that gaming is still susceptible to ill-founded prejudice

Children need what developing human beings have always needed, including real food (as opposed to processed 'junk'), real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives." These are the words of an open letter, sent to the Daily Telegraph by a group of 110 writers, academics and medical experts who feel that the rising incidence of childhood depression and behavioural problems is a crisis which requires urgent debate and reform. It's a long way from the moralistic hysteria of many of the assaults on videogaming currently underway in the US, but the message is the same: games are junk food. At best nutritionless and at worst actively poisonous, the idea that they might have any beneficial elements is dismissed without further consideration.

And you can see the point: all too often, the defences that the games industry makes of itself sound like the slightly queasy delusions of the fast food industry. The same arguments are put forward: our products are safe if consumed as part of a balanced diet. They have children's menus, we have PEGI ratings. They're quick to point the finger, as we are, at other mitigating factors. 'It's not all our fault, and it's not our fault at all if you over-did it, or ignored our warnings' – it's becoming the defining defence of the indefensible.

But the games industry is going to have to take the initiative, with more dynamism and determination than it has before, if it's going to end this prejudice that the unreal is the enemy of the real, rather than a part of it that's as old as campfire stories and cave paintings. Baroness Susan Greenfield, one of the signatories and the director of the Royal Institution, is happy to say that books are better for children's imaginations than videogames, since in books you have to visualise what's described (never mind that you don't have to – it's just that you can), whereas in games all you have to do is look (never mind that you have to imagine what to do next, where to go next, what to build next). Games aren't junk food, they're just food. What makes them good or bad is the quality of the ingredients and the abilities of the cook.



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **STARBREEZE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **2007**

The Darkness

Can a second lunar-powered shooter overshadow the first, or does Starbreeze remain imprisoned at Butcher Bay?



With Darkness weapons deployed, Jackie's POV more closely resembles that of *Beach Head* or *Armored Core* than a standard FPS. The dense fields of foreground and background activity make good use of the 16:9 frame

Butcher Bay: a triple-max prison – a no-daylight slam. Ten minutes every other day on the dog run; protein waffles aren't bad. For gamers watching 2004's movie The Chronicles Of Riddick, Vin Diesel just growled the name and the details took care of themselves. *Escape From Butcher Bay* was a great companion piece, both referential and individual, and better than most at suggesting the physical presence of the player, the world around them, and the universe around that. *The Darkness* marks Starbreeze Studios' own escape from a trailblazing debut, but not in every respect.

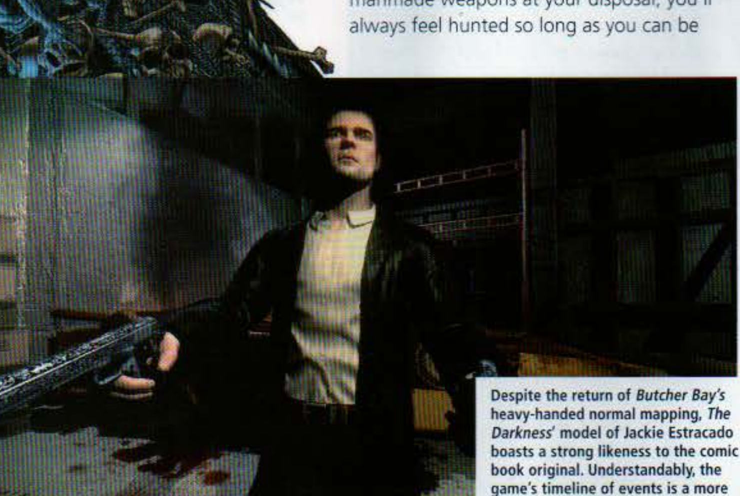
Here, once again, is a firstperson shooter with thirdperson interludes, where the light is both your great enemy and your enemies' greatest defence. Regardless of the manmade weapons at your disposal, you'll always feel hunted so long as you can be seen. But when the lights go out (usually by your hand), the roles are spectacularly reversed. In simply eyeing-up the themes and devices of Top Cow Productions' bleak comic book revenge story, the Swedish developer must have seen half its job done already.

Drawn and articulated with all the pristine grace of anime, the Demon Arms are a sight to behold when they take centre stage. Their serpent eyes glow more intensely when empowered by greater darkness, though their strength as game devices will be as much a question of level design

The Darkness fades in on mafia hitman Jackie Estracado's 21st birthday, minutes before he's betrayed by his adoptive uncle Paulie, don of the Franchetti crime family. But a police chase (an on-rails introduction with moderate freedom to look and shoot) and subsequent car crash derails those plans, just as Jackie discovers something else he didn't know before. Somewhere on Earth there's a family cursed with an inheritance called the Darkness – a supernatural power that kills father as it's passed on to son, then lying dormant until a prescribed day. The family in question is Jackie's, of course, and the day in question in this one.

Starbreeze is introducing its latest player character in much the same way as it did Richard Riddick, starting first with the fists and guns before rolling out several superhuman awakenings, keeping the foundation of the *Butcher Bay* control system while building series-specific changes on top. You're still a fully-modelled avatar rather than a suspended pair of hands, which gives your dual-wielded pistols slightly unorthodox positions on the screen. Close encounters with enemies will again trigger a gruesome melee kill (here modelled on Equilibrium's 'Gun Kata'), but it's the longer-range combat that's changed. When you're obstructed, typically by some form of defensive cover, each hand will automatically adopt the right position to train on a designated target. It's a novel attempt to carry the strategies of thirdperson combat across the traditional firstperson divide.

Starbreeze is introducing its latest player character in much the same way as it did Richard Riddick, starting with fists and guns before rolling out superhuman awakenings



Despite the return of *Butcher Bay's* heavy-handed normal mapping, *The Darkness'* model of Jackie Estracado boasts a strong likeness to the comic book original. Understandably, the game's timeline of events is a more condensed, if respectful adaptation











Lead to expect a high calibre of NPC theatrics by the promise of vo-cap, it's disappointing to encounter that most unnatural of videogame afflictions, the inability of characters to move a great deal while delivering dialogue. With luck, the final version will be more expressive

Clues to what happens next exist in the game's environment – an urban underbelly, all HD concrete decorated with trash. In this day and age, in such a playground of real-world physics, destruction on a grand scale almost invariably hangs in the air. And sure enough, when the Darkness comes it descends. Explaining the diminutive basic gun models, an imposing arsenal of eldritch weapons encroaches on the screen. A pair of necroplasmic tentacles – the Demon Arms – spring from your body, while autonomous Darklings crave the chance to scamper after foes or knock out further lights. And the damage they inflict is remarkable. Selected with one button press and activated with another, they can hurl vehicles, writhe covertly about the environment or simply tear its inhabitants apart.

Most promisingly, however, the Darkness powers are nebulous – limited in form only by the imagination of the bearer. Or so it goes for the comic book Jackie. Quite how Starbreeze can interpret that with the finite time and resources available remains to be seen, but in this case the *lack* of information is itself uplifting. Those familiar with *Butcher Bay*'s breathtaking environmental twist – the one that turned the game's tone completely, albeit briefly on its head – will testify to its creator's love of a good surprise. Already we've seen one example of a more outlandish Darkness attack: a smart bomb that opens a black hole in the corner of a room, violently sucking every physics object within to its centre before dropping the whole lot casually to the floor. The effect on people, sandwiched in a second amid a Katamari ball of tables and chairs, speaks for itself.

The Darkness certainly isn't taking its subject lightly, and what's been seen of its characters suggests few for whom a tortured fate doesn't seem appropriate. But for all the heads that are sawn off and bodies urinated on by your familiars, it's their master who needs to feel the most pain for this adaptation to strike a chord. To quote the comic book Jackie: "First thing I ever did on this world was to kill my dad, just by being born." In a genre packed with the sullen and the sore, illustrating a man suffering a genuine darkness of the soul will take more than what these first few levels have.



Mischievous and murderous, the Darklings aren't the easiest creatures to control, though Jackie retains some authority over where they go and who they molest. They certainly love trouble, but they seldom succumb to it

But with only the first fifth of the story revealed, of which much is setup and instruction, the potential is surely there. You don't devise a system called 'vo-cap', designed specifically to bring emotion to normal-mapped faces, if you've no plan of using it. Likewise, you don't ask noted comic author Paul Jenkins to pen your dialogue if there's nothing you want to say. Despite prior fears of a less flavoursome game world, *The Darkness* is also quick to prove that *Butcher Bay*'s rich 5.1 soundscape was no fluke. Give the game a speaker and a different rumble of unpleasantness is likely to come out. In the case of surround speakers, that might just be prolific ex-Faith No More vocalist Mike Patton, effortlessly turning his stage persona into the devil in your head.



TV times

Something Starbreeze is especially proud of (for reasons we can't quite grasp) is the technology it has developed for playing longer-than-average media clips back through in-game displays. The game presently uses royalty-free clips such as Murnau's Nosferatu, and more productive animations concerned with backstory and peripheral events. At present, however, the placement of the game's attention-seeking television sets seems somewhat contrived. Starbreeze suggests that Blu-ray will allow the PS3 version of the game to feature a greater number of these clips, some of them potentially feature length. And if that doesn't validate scepticism over what the new format can bring to games, it's hard to imagine what will.

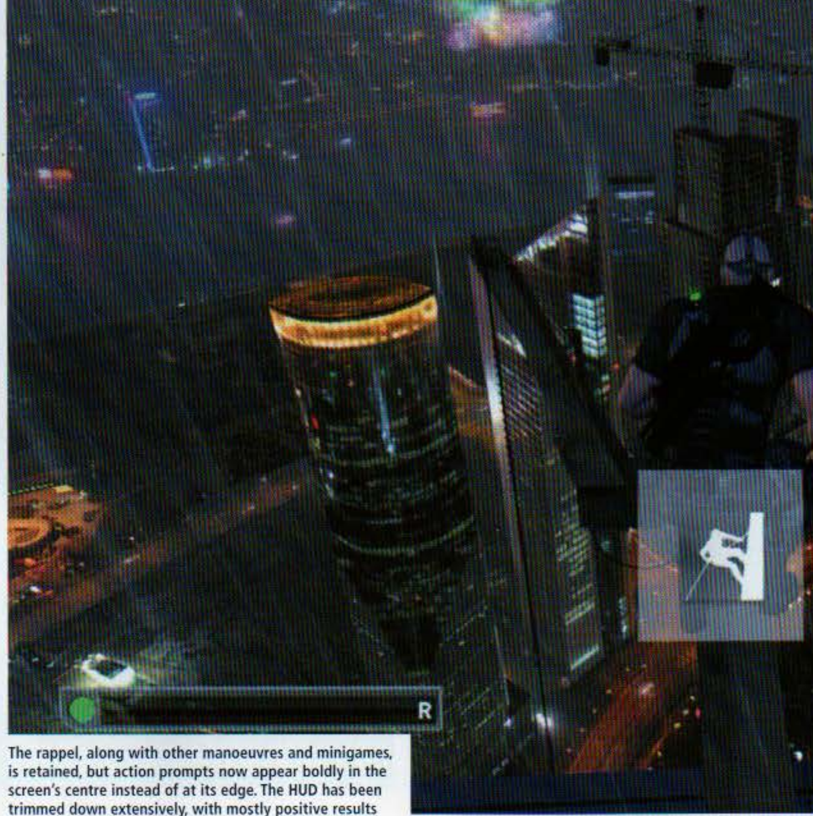
FORMAT: **360, GC, PC, PS2, XBOX, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **INTERNATIONAL**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E158, E164**

Splinter Cell: Double Agent

A series that loves to leave players in the dark takes the idea to the next level



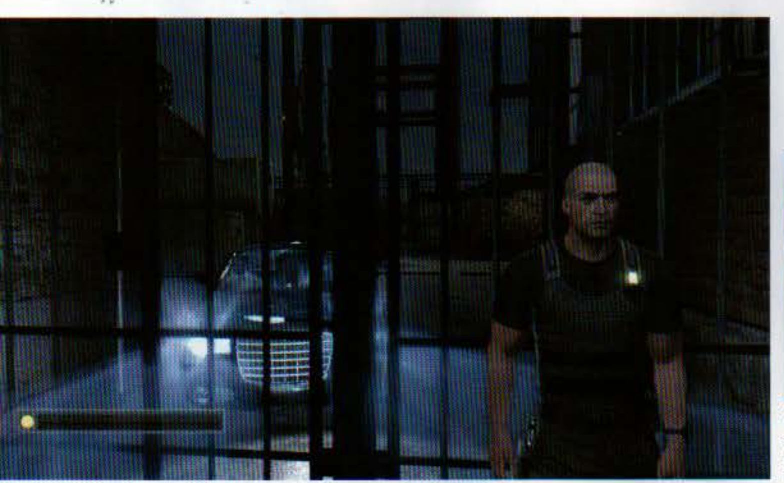
Continuing the *Splinter Cell* tradition, each format will be receiving exclusive features: Xbox gets a new Spies Vs Spies spin on its multiplayer, 360 and PC owners have two alternate solo missions and differing multiplayer maps, while the Wii version will make some obviously dedicated uses of its motion sensing



The rappel, along with other manoeuvres and minigames, is retained, but action prompts now appear boldly in the screen's centre instead of at its edge. The HUD has been trimmed down extensively, with mostly positive results

Splinter Cell has always been about freedom, from the figurative licence to kill handed to NSA agent Sam Fisher in his inaugural game, through to the irritating checkpoints and mission demands that bogged that debut down. Those issues were finally resolved with the quicksaves and relaxed parameters that made the third title, *Chaos Theory*, the strongest to date. Now, that freedom comes with a price, and punishment for sloppy stealth work is no longer just the responsibility of the end-of-mission rating reports. *Double Agent* has Fisher infiltrating a criminal organisation, John Brown's Army, a brazen operation designed to collapse the disruptive underground group, an undercover gambit that brings two new features along with it, in the form of a hub area and the fundamental 'trust' system.

Those two things tie in, of course; Fisher will return several times to the JBA HQ building, where being left alone to perform training activities gives the chance to sneakily sabotage the hideout during whatever spare time you can make for him. While the NSA can monitor your every move, it can't control the missions that Sam gets sent on, often requesting secondary objectives be fulfilled while performing JBA work. If he can maintain the NSA's faith, Fisher will be rewarded with superior equipment which, if exposed, could attract suspicion from his employers. It's this intertwining that's the most interesting aspect of the system, but it's a framework that's barely explained or expounded upon by the game's opening handful of stages, perhaps simply down to the preview stage's incompleteness (although the rules that govern the JBA HQ are made very clear). Each mission offers a primary assignment that can't be ignored, with secondary goals to be indulged in or forgotten about in order to fiddle with



Fisher himself is showing some cracks, his weary face emphasising the weight his ageing shoulders carry, as twice the number of eyes and ears are keeping tabs on him



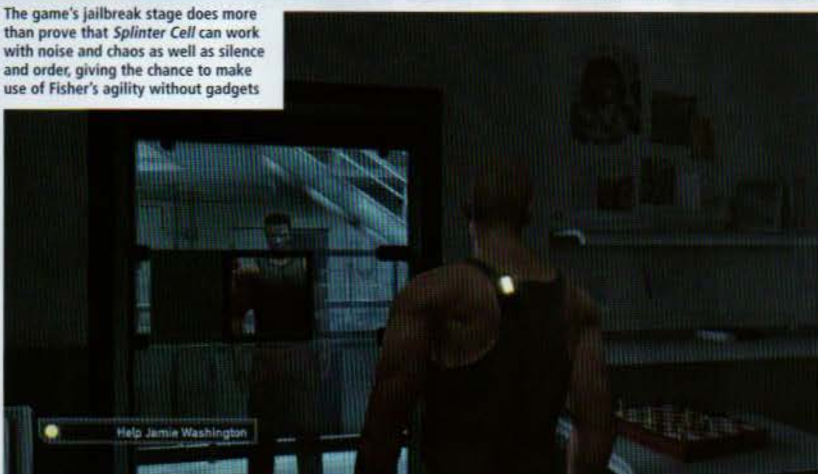
Underwater treks through icy floes – during the invasion of a supertanker, for instance – are simplistic, and a little lean on possibilities. But those that end with a stealth kill are worth the wait, thanks to an efficiently brutal animation sequence







The game's jailbreak stage does more than prove that *Splinter Cell* can work with noise and chaos as well as silence and order, giving the chance to make use of Fisher's agility without gadgets





Back to basics

Sam Fisher's role may involve avoiding doing anything that Bond would do, having to forever work from the shadows and show off to an audience of one. But the 360/PC versions of *Double Agent* throw a few scripted but flashy mission-opening events Sam's way, minimal minigames that are played for scene-setting grandeur and nothing more. An airdrop onto a glacier opens with a high-flying freefall, a short section of controlled skydiving that terminates with a fumbled parachute deployment and the need to use the left thumbstick to find and activate the spare. And the opening to the Shanghai stage sees Sam's chopper pilot taken out, with the helicopter needing to be commandeered and levelled out as it swoops perilously close to the city's taller buildings.

your standing with either party. There are meatier consequences to come as the story progresses and the stakes raise, but Fisher's early missions are light on wrought, confrontational choices. Untidy play is still allowed, of course, but to follow such a path may mean you'll have no say as to where your perceived allegiances will lay – it's less freedom, sure, but its context does make the player ask themselves the kind of questions that *Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Fable* could never assert.

Still, however the economics of subterfuge are due to play out, the magnetism of the scenario proves effective in practice, thanks to the twin channels of communication that Fisher receives throughout each mission, and the feeling of remoteness that comes from having no unified back-up. Fisher himself is showing some cracks, his weary face, shaven head and unofficial outfits emphasising the weight his ageing shoulders carry, as twice the number of eyes and ears are now keeping tabs on his behaviour, all too ready to abandon him.

Stealth feedback is handled via a trio of lights, two strapped to the front and back of Sam's suit, and one attached to his rifle – failing that, a small light sits next to the onscreen mission-update ticker bar – lit with a colour to indicate safe invisibility or the need for caution. A small optional onscreen map uses overhead terrain and a GPS system that tracks other people as highly visible dots, but is only visible when Fisher is stationary. A click of the right thumbstick offers a firstperson view and slower movement, another slight but useful refinement that allows smoother navigation of those corners and cubby-holes that are unable to comfortably accommodate Sam's crouched bulk in thirdperson.

Visually, the 360 is understandably kind to *Double Agent*, lending solidity and clarity to a game that thrives on precision. Levels are better decorated than before, but the impact of new visual effects is left to peripheral moments – fireworks exploding behind the bubbled glass of a Shanghai hotel room littered with gauze screens, or an enormous paper dragon dangling from a roof. However, *Double Agent*'s audio work is already excellent, with a typically dark and downbeat soundtrack that segues into a number of sound cues or a tense crescendo depending on the vicinity and alertness of an enemy. Above all that, however, the solo campaign is just one aspect of *Double Agent*'s package, with the multiplayer versus and co-op modes established so well within *Chaos Theory* making their tweaked returns, leaving much more than just the morality of Fisher's actions to be weighed up in the imminent review.



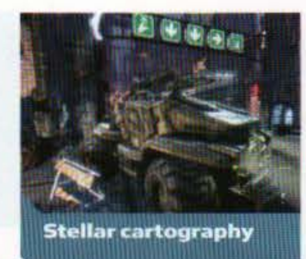


Fisher's health meter only appears when needed, a small shield that flashes urgently as he takes hits. It's an imprecise gauge of just how much health he has remaining, however, and there's another, more effective representation – the screen blurs and fades as Sam nears death – that provides better feedback

FORMAT: **PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**
RELEASE: **2007 (PC), TBA (PS3)**
ORIGIN: **US**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

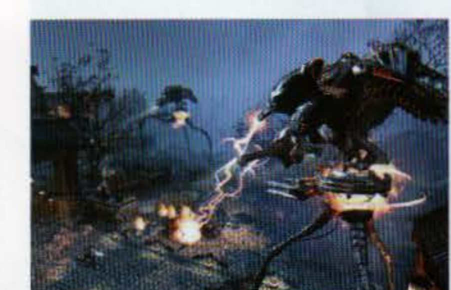
Unreal Tournament 2007

UT's latest realisation: adding weight and substance to online warfare is less a question of gravitas than gravity



Stellar cartography

On PC, *UT 2007* will ship with the full Unreal Engine 3 toolkit, the lynchpin of a community that Epic is keen to reassemble. "When we look at what was working for *UT 2004*," explains Morris, "the mod scene was really thriving. We had small mods where guys would create new weapons, all the way up to total conversion mods like Red Orchestra. So we want that same level of mod activity – it keeps the product relevant and on the shelves, and it keeps it installed on your PC: you never know what's coming next. We want to make it easier for people to install mods this time, not have people asking, 'Is this mod worth installing?' Also, people need to be directed to where the best mods are, rather than the ones that are unfinished or simply not very good."



Vehicles boast names such as Hellbender and Darkwalker, but thankfully catch the eye better than the ear. The latter has no reticule, but can chase ground targets with its scorching beams, dodging Steven Spielberg's solicitors as it goes along



For the hardcore, *2K4* was just this weird deviation that they didn't ask for, and they didn't want." Producer **Jeff Morris**, a man who personifies the speed and volume of *Unreal Tournament*, and is by extension Epic's own version of Tron, confirms something that's always been suspected of the series – a wavering direction. "Getting this game back to '99, which had much higher gravity and closer, face-to-face fights – that's what they want. And it makes the game accessible at the same time. Though the better player should always beat the worse player, the worse player should feel like he had a chance. In *2K4*, he didn't even see the guy killing him.

"We still have double jumps and all the staples of *UT*, but a lot of the crazier mobility stuff we got rid of, because it was so hard to keep track of what was going on." Fans needn't fear too much, because *UT* hasn't drastically changed: it still wants to have its cake and eat it, with both furious deathmatch and more open Warfare gametypes. But after almost three years of absence, and with a new platform to consider in PS3, Epic wants to maximise the appeal of *Unreal Tournament 2007* rather than toy with it. "Right now *UT* is PC-focused with a PlayStation version coming either simultaneously or a short time after. I'm a PC player first and foremost, but the more I see of PS3, the more I realise that we don't have to make compromises that could make PC players unhappy," says Morris.

A new demonstration build certainly doesn't suggest cutbacks, though it's clear that Warfare has been nudged into a realm of accessibility conducive to its massively multiplayer premise. Opposition for the returning Axos clan comes from the Necris, an undead race alluded to throughout the series and realised in *Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict*. In a promising sign that it's finally settling down, the two factions are more distinctive than any the series has presented before, though still confined, it must be said, to that vapid Heavy Metal art style. In the supervehicles that sit atop each respective technology tree, *UT* finally has assets to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with its polygon devouring engine. Just.

But in departing from that *Championship* model of dual-platform support, has this game obliged itself to a greater singleplayer bias? Morris believes not. "Every copy of *2K4* had its own unique key, and if you ever connected to our master server, then we knew about it. Believe it or not, less than 50 per cent of the people who logged on actually played the game online, either because they didn't want to deal with e-jerks, or they didn't think they were good enough. I'll be really surprised if the online component doesn't take off on PS3, but we can deal with both scenarios."

"When the AI would miss in *2K4*," says Morris, "they'd draw a cylinder and just randomly miss in one of those directions. When a human misses, he's gonna miss where he thought you were going to be had you not dodged; that's where we're spending our AI time now"



Though *UT*'s design brief doesn't simply read, 'Gunishment,' seeing beyond its arsenal is tough. Epic loves to advertise that the 2007 version's weapons push more polygons than entire levels did in 2003, and the meticulous reload animations do command attention



Guitar Hero II

Success may have brought the pressure of a major-label signing, but nobody told Harmonix second albums were supposed to be difficult

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION/RED OCTANE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (US), DECEMBER (UK**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Guitar Hero's instantaneous appeal started with the guitar itself: the chunky, tactile plastic talisman that so effortlessly drew players out of themselves and into the music. The same shouldn't be true of the sequel – available sans controller, it's a refinement and expansion, all about the songs. But the new, cherry-red variant that ships with *Guitar Hero II* will prove tempting to many who never bought a second controller first time round (and maybe even some who did). Appropriately so, because it's with two players that this game, more so even than the first, comes into its own.

The competitive score attack returns, and will be as compelling as ever to jousting alpha axemen. But the rivalries it encouraged were always underpinned by the joy of wringing a tune out together, and *GHII* capitalises on this in a new co-operative mode, with the second player taking on a bass or rhythm guitar part according to the song. Unlike competitive matches, these songs can be failed. The inclusive, collaborative spirit is further reinforced – in versus mode as well – by the option for each player to select their own difficulty level, meaning guitarists of all abilities can be challenged and entertained side-by-side. It's more a correction of a horrible oversight than an unforeseen stroke of genius, but it's nothing less than hugely welcome.

Bass and rhythm parts are by nature quite repetitive, and on easier settings and simpler songs can feel too much like an unglamorous support role. At their best, though, the insistent rhythms and subtle pattern shifts require a hypnotised concentration that's quite new to the game, while show-boaters can find plenty to enjoy in Sweet Child O' Mine's bassline or the climactic squalls of twin lead that end Lynryd Skynyrd's Freebird.

Those two crowd-pleasing rock epics look likely to be the foremost instances of wishlist-fulfilment in *GHII*'s songbook. The other tracks revealed suggest a surprisingly esoteric selection, one that is not so exciting at first glance, but offering a broader range of styles and perhaps more long-term satisfaction. The jazzy flourishes of Rush and Primus, The Police and Pretenders' clipped guitar pop, the frantic stop-start thrash of Psychobilly Freakout, and kitsch instrumentals like Misirlou and Jessica (better known as the themes to Pulp Fiction and Top Gear) should all prove welcome detours from the riffing and squealing that are *Guitar Hero*'s bread and butter. It's clearly an aficionado's choice, and perhaps not the easiest sell. But maybe it doesn't need to be, because to anyone who's been near one of those toy Gibson SGs, the prospect of more and better *Guitar Hero* is the easiest sell in the world.

Practice mode allows tricky sections to be isolated and rehearsed at one of four playback speeds, from normal to a snail's pace. It's one of many efforts to make the game more accessible without diminishing its challenge



Studying the current handful of songs across difficulty settings, it looks as if *GHII* will be a better teacher than the first, with a smoother difficulty curve and ore gradual introduction to tricky patterns and techniques



It's a shame that difficulty balancing will probably keep co-op play – and thus the bass and rhythm parts – out of the career mode that unlocks all the songs, or *GHII* would be a game that you never needed to play alone





GHII looks almost identical to the first. Audio mixing is of the same high quality, but given the wide stylistic range the cover-bands' efforts could be even more hit-and-miss

The 23 songs confirmed so far

Alice in Chains – Them Bones
Allman Brothers Band – Jessica
Anthrax – Madhouse
Avenged Sevenfold – Beast and the Harlot
Black Sabbath – War Pigs
Butthole Surfers – Who Was In My Room Last Night?
Dick Dale – Misirlou
Guns N' Roses – Sweet Child O' Mine
Heart – Crazy On You
KISS – Strutter
Lamb of God – Laid to Rest
Lynyrd Skynrd – Freebird
Mötley Crüe – Shout at the Devil
Nirvana – Heart-Shaped Box
The Police – Message in a Bottle
The Pretenders – Tattooed Love Boys
Primus – John The Fisherman
Reverend Horton Heat – Psychobilly Freakout
The Rolling Stones – Can You Hear Me Knocking?
Rush – YYZ
Spinal Tap – Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You (Tonight)
Stone Temple Pilots – Trippin' on a Hole in a Paper Heart
Van Halen – You Really Got Me



It wasn't quite clear how it will work from the demo, but in an apparent lift from *FlatOut 2* you will be able to control bails with ragdoll aftertouch. Mostly you'll use this to minimise injury and hospital bills, but some challenges ask you to break as many bones as you can

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**

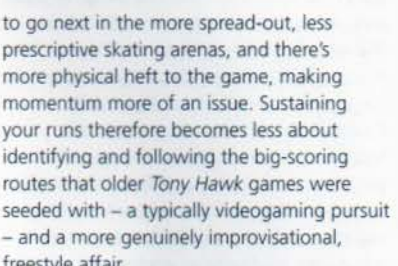


Tony Hawk's Project 8

Neversoft puts the freestlye back into skating as Tony takes it easy in a next-gen reinvention

It's not uncommon for the developers of long-running franchises to view a new hardware generation as a fresh start – an opportunity not just to build fresh code, but to re-examine a game's purpose, to strip away the layers of design elaboration and feature-set bloat and take a long, hard look at the traditions that have been preserved beneath them. This videogame regression therapy is often essential to the creative health of a series and the people who make it. *Project 8* is shaping up to be a restrained, but otherwise textbook example of this process; for the first time in years, it feels as if Neversoft is making a game about skateboarding, not a game about *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*.

There are plenty of eye-catching new features for the back of the box, of course, but before you get to those, there are subtle but substantial shifts in the trick system and environmental design. The pace required to keep a combo running has been relaxed a little, giving you time to think about where to go next in the more spread-out, less prescriptive skating arenas, and there's more physical heft to the game, making momentum more of an issue. Sustaining your runs therefore becomes less about identifying and following the big-scoring routes that older *Tony Hawk* games were seeded with – a typically videogaming pursuit – and a more genuinely improvisational, freestyle affair.



Not content with slowing the game down itself, Neversoft has also given the player the power to do the same. Push down both sticks while in the air and the game crashes into super slow-motion and zooms in on your feet; the sticks then control your feet individually, allowing you to improvise tricks by spinning the board in all three axes of rotation, in any combination you like. The Nail The Trick mode is consequently subtle, precise, intuitive and instantly rewarding – the challenge coming mostly, and considerably, from timing the trick to end with the board stationary and right-side-up when you hit the ground. It won't change the game, but will grace it with moments where its code-punching videogame shorthand is brilliantly unpicked and you're granted a skater's physical feel for his board.

The game's career-mode conceit is that you start as the 200th best skater in town and must climb to the top eight, receiving tips and challenges from famous pros along the way. Although new areas in the town have to be unlocked, it's streaming and fully free-roaming and liberally scattered with challenges, and there is no forced difficulty setting; each challenge can be completed to Amateur, Pro or Sick level at any time. It's hard to judge from a short test, but it feels encouragingly like the vast playground it should be – a very liberal and loose framework that encourages exploration, experimentation and goal-free downtime. *Project 8* is shaping up to be the most accessible and free-spirited *Tony Hawk's* yet.





In common with the freeform theme, some ramps and rails will be movable in order to create your own lines, or access secret areas. More customisation comes with the ability to change clothes and accessories at any time in Your Room, modifying one of the preset skater stereotypes into something a little more personal



Cheap trick

Barge into one of the other skaters you'll see around town and knock him over, and you'll get to see the carnage behind you in a neat little picture-in-picture camera; but you'll also have made an enemy who'll try to do the same to you. Neversoft is aiming for a greater interaction with skaters and spectators in *Project 8*, and you'll need to impress pedestrians to build up respect, as well as perform photo and video shoots. The inset camera will feature again in the latter, showing the video footage as you keep up with a cameraman and follow his instructions.

Stylistically, *Project 8* is very down-to-earth; the design of the town trades spectacle and character for an unshakably solid credibility, rendered in remarkable detail. The scuffed normality of the surroundings feels comfortable against the ever-so-slightly cartoony exuberance of the skaters





Much of what you'll salvage and steal from the Zone is being kept under wraps – that's the hope, at least. With neither premise nor mission structure particularly recognisable next to their *Oblivion Lost* versions, it isn't clear whether its commodities have changed







Stalker: Shadow Of Chernobyl

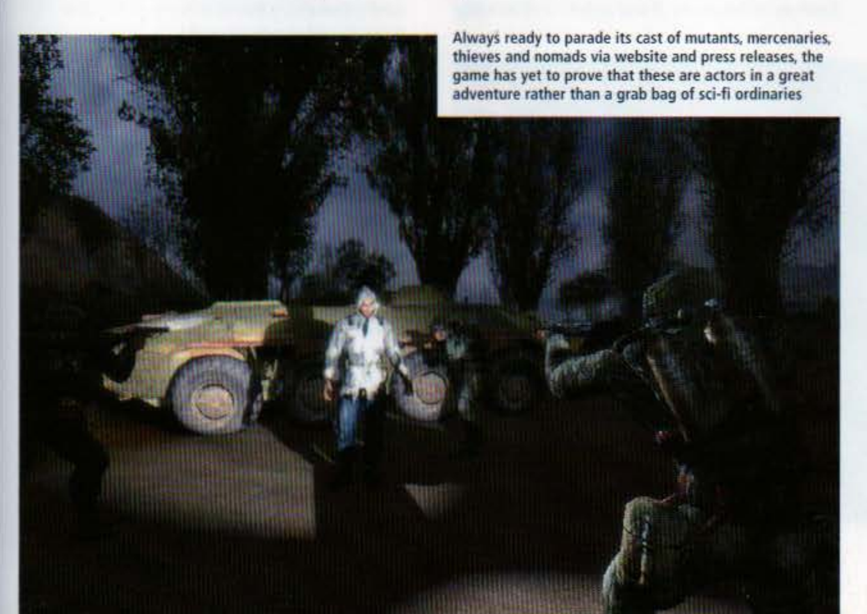
It once looked like Chernobyl would dwell in the shadow of Stalker, but disaster has been averted

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **GSC GAME WORLD**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E125, E129, E138, E164**

S*talker*'s wilderness years have improbably played to its advantage. The sense of desolation and abandonment in its 30 square kilometres has refined with age, and particularly with the impression that this is a game world, quarantined for five years, finally open to be explored. The light and heat effects once so central to the appeal of its X-Ray engine have lost their fire somewhat, but in a further irony, exist in an environment best served cold. Such qualities aren't incidental, though they may sound it. GSC has designed this game dead, and that's just how it appears, the dereliction of the Zone suggesting hidden terror proportional to its apparent calm.

But beyond the backdrop lies a game still quite capable of meltdown. A tour of its wastelands, sewers and industrial facilities points out several of the grand ideas that have carried it far outside its developer's comfort zone. Its checklist of features remains exhilarating, but in time could read more like the TORCH report, summarising all the fatal ambitions and structural flaws.

A hundred other Stalkers roam the land to poach, investigate, or scour – each guided by a logical set of interests. So when the time-of-day cycle rolls over into night, they seek shelter, leaving the Zone's wildlife, and on occasion mutant-life, to prowl the land. Their combative pathfinding and tactical choices are instinctive, lending sizeable mission-based assaults like the one most recently demonstrated a genuine dynamism. Unfortunately, that particular example led to the entire player-conscripted band of NPCs being wiped out with the siege barely begun. *Stalker*'s naturalism is convincing – more *Oblivion* than *Boiling Point* – but it's still untamed, and artistically it remains quite forlorn.



Always ready to parade its cast of mutants, mercenaries, thieves and nomads via website and press releases, the game has yet to prove that these are actors in a great adventure rather than a grab bag of sci-fi ordinaries



It may yet be the game's undoing, but *Stalker*'s ambition also stands it apart. The enormous size of its game world complements the premise and aesthetic of an irradiated hinterland, which is a better starting point than most

As the THQ troubleshooters behind the game's re-emergence must have noticed, it's also in need of a binding agent – something to give the player purpose beyond the if/then routines of the AI. Though the emphasis on missions and handholding has increased, the latter in the guise of a lengthened tutorial, there's still a noticeable lack of focus or drama to this unruly sandbox. Trades conducted with NPCs illustrate the full scale of its inventory system, and the odds seem even of both interface and interaction becoming either a wealth of opportunity or an unsophisticated mess. A last few months of development are left, at least, before that 2007 launch period, and much greater exposure to the game is admittedly required.

Easier to measure is multiplayer, which has made little ground since its early days of resembling *Counter-Strike*, but has notably made that big decision of whether to incorporate the anomalous energy spots of the main game: it does. So a grisly demise befalls those who brush against the corrosive 'rusty hair' (localisation is another issue), or encounter a gravity concentration field. The 32-player deathmatches and artefact treasure hunts are at least stable in the latest build, and feature-complete enough to leave attention for the more interesting, more considerable challenges of the main singleplayer adventure, fascinating as it stubbornly remains.



Critical reaction

In a potentially rather morbid display of backslapping, *Stalker* was recently play-tested not just by real-life Chernobyl director Igor Gramotkin, but by the plant's technical director for safety, Alexander Novikov. Of course, the tenures of the two gentlemen began after April 25, 1986, so their roles are entirely remedial. Gramotkin praised the game for its authentic feel, which might come as a shock to those more adventurous holidaymakers planning a trip to the northern Ukraine who are yet to provision for encounters with freelance military bounty hunters and freaks with tentacles instead of faces. Regardless, there's no faulting the game's tone, and each of its landmarks, be it the stricken town of Pripyat or the macabre sarcophagus of the reactor itself, invokes a real compulsion to venture out and walk among its ghosts.



Combat is wickedly one-sided, with the fate of victims entirely at the mercy of the kind of attack you wish to unleash





FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 20**

Destroy All Humans 2

A return to Earth for Crypto, as he clearly missed some humans on his last attempt



Cryptosexist?

It's surprising that a game with such an accessible central character should tailor its approach so blatantly towards adolescent males. The conspiracy-ridden plot is so full of machismo that it soon becomes tired and weary. Later missions find you hooking up with blonde Russian Natalya, whose presence in the game seems wholly predicated towards being the token in-game T&A. Crypto is such a neutral presence that alienating a good proportion of the game's prospective audience in this way makes very little sense.

Destroy All Humans combined a now ubiquitous free-roaming framework with a generic sci-fi twist. Pitching a wise-cracking alien against the small-minded conformism of 1950s America, the game encouraged the widespread destruction and eventual invasion of the United States. This sequel is fundamentally more of the same, expanded over a global setting and with a far stronger emphasis on free-roaming.

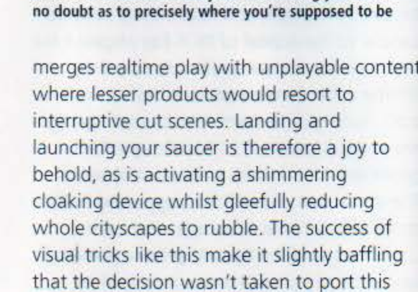
Leering, lascivious alien star Crypto remains the game's strongest focus, and rightly so. Although it's initially difficult to empathise with him, the game manages to endear players to the extra-terrestrial by highlighting his unique power and outcast isolation. Crypto's abilities remain undimmed – he's still able to perform telepathy, telekinesis and to body-snatch any passing human as a disguise. Entirely gratuitous but entirely enjoyable, these talents really do shine in play.

There are three new locations to rip up: Bay City (San Francisco), Albion (London) and Takoshima (Tokyo). Both Bay City and Albion are rather uninspired, with the mission story arcs by turns shallow and crass (a cult leader named Bongwater setting the tone). Then Takoshima happens and all is almost forgiven. Exotic and elegant, the Japanese stage ratchets both gameplay and game settings to where you want them to be. Crypto soon encounters errant ninjas, the Yakuza, moody schoolgirls, paranoid salarymen and an awesome parody of Godzilla. When you reach this glorious, fictitious Japan you can't help wondering whether this is the same game.

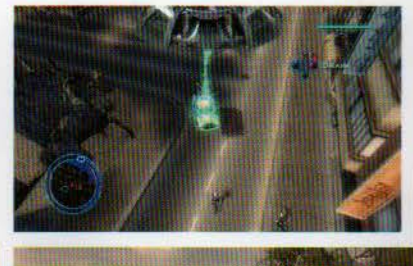
Pandemic is obviously passionate about crafting as immersive an experience as possible. Although graphics are largely of teh standard you'd expect from last generation, in some areas they pleasantly surprise. *Destroy All Humans 2* seamlessly and adroitly merges realtime play with unplayable content where lesser products would resort to interruptive cut scenes. Landing and launching your saucer is therefore a joy to behold, as is activating a shimmering cloaking device whilst gleefully reducing whole cityscapes to rubble. The success of visual tricks like this make it slightly baffling that the decision wasn't taken to port this game to next-gen consoles.

Many ideas, unfortunately, still seem underdeveloped. Weaponry features some cool gimmicks (chaining ray-gun attacks, freezing time) but should be far more powerful at the outset. Objectives often feel pointless and locations seem to repeat themselves across the globe. Hints at satire are hit and miss – what at first promises to be a smart homage to 1960s culture soon descends into the realms of toilet humour, erasing some of the genuinely funny material to be found in subtler moments.

As with its predecessor, *Destroy All Humans 2* looks set to fall short of fulfilling its rich potential. This is, after a fashion, no bad thing. You'll be left wondering why it hasn't been easier to satisfy the first game's shortcomings, but you'll also come away with the distinct feeling that there's plenty of life in Crypto yet. Inch by inch, little by little, Pandemic appears to be edging towards the game he deserves.



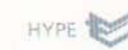
The oddly familiar Japanese city of Takoshima is just as alluring by air as it is from the ground, with geographical landmarks such as the Tokyo Tower leaving you with no doubt as to precisely where you're supposed to be







London, in direct contrast to the game's Japanese levels, is rather depressing. Grey is everywhere, which tends to make things drag





Without the near-future frills of *GR:AW*, specifically its aerial reconnaissance drone, *Vegas* has had to turn elsewhere for an equivalent steal. Sam Fisher doesn't seem to be using his snakecam much at the moment anyway, so into the pocket it goes





Rainbow Six Vegas

A Tom Clancy transplant operation lifts the series to its feet, but at what cost?

Every rescue mission has a price, even for those trained to never leave a man behind. For *Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell*, the price of rallying to the fallen *Rainbow Six* might well be their identity. Though the relationship between the Tom Clancy games has long been one of the most vampiric, the damage sustained by *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* – a minor debacle, essentially caused by the switch from a tactical to more visceral stance – was such that this new game might almost bleed its donors dry.

The asset that *Lockdown* lacked the most, which *Vegas* has taken most zealously from its Clancy peers, is direction. This is a perfectly located honeymoon to *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*'s marriage of tactics and 360 visuals, adding glitz to the glamour and turning a penchant for spectacle into full blown obsession. Its action follows a prescribed pattern that's loosely enforced, but strongly suggested by the fixed cover positions, enemy spawns and scripted dramatic events that comprise each mission. Though there's an authentic severity to the health system – if you're shot your vision blurs, and ultimately you fall down – there's little in this style of action that compares to the electrifying randomness of the *SWAT* series, or indeed to the days of *Rogue Spear*.

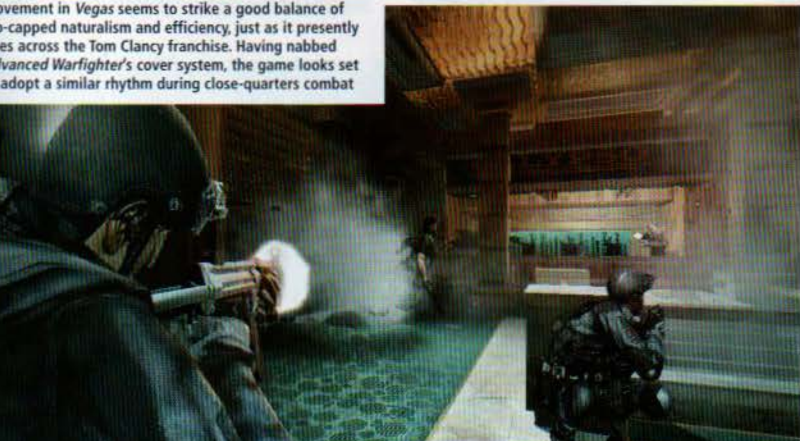
So *Vegas* is shaping up to be a largely linear ride, much like *GR:AW* and much like *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, but that's its prerogative, and it's a valid one if it lets off enough flash and bang before the end. What it needs to do that *GR:AW* singleplayer didn't, however, is avoid derailing itself in the process. Ubisoft hasn't shown enough of *Vegas*' assault/recon behaviour for us to know if it's as incidental as it was there, but the pathfinding, reactivity and above all common sense of its allies in the latest demo – a quite generic construction site mission staged in the unfinished Dante's Casino – hint at great improvement. Moreover, the interior habitats of *Rainbow Six* seem better suited to both the technology and interface it has acquired.

That magic moment principle of *Halo*'s works well here, *Vegas* throwing enough variables into the process of sweeping and clearing one room after another to keep them fresh. Besides the usual questions of whether to smoke or frag, snipe or storm, there are now rappel opportunities to consider, allowing you invert your position on the rope and essentially sneak down upon your enemies. Sam Fisher would be proud, were he not so worried about his own job security.

Ubisoft maintains that ambience is what now keeps its Clancy titles distinct from each other despite their incestuous mechanics. As Ubisoft Montreal draws a particularly great deal of substance from its styles, it's a claim that wouldn't be believable were it to come from anyone else. But there's little doubt that *Vegas* is gambling with a fair degree of franchise integrity. Even if the different series can remain tenably separate, you have to wonder if their shared focus – that lopsided marriage of brains and beauty – can prosper once its sparkle fades.



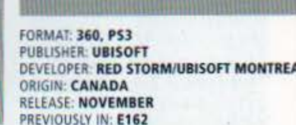
Movement in *Vegas* seems to strike a good balance of mo-capped naturalism and efficiency, just as it presently does across the Tom Clancy franchise. Having nabbed *Advanced Warfighter*'s cover system, the game looks set to adopt a similar rhythm during close-quarters combat







Diners at The Stratosphere's Top Of The World restaurant will confirm that if you can draw to the horizon of the Las Vegas valley, you can draw anywhere. Red Storm has taken some liberties and cut a few corners with its version, but the supreme sense of scale remains



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RED STORM/UBISOFT MONTREA**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E162**



Always bet on Red

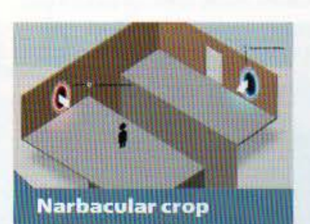
For many, if not most of its fans, *Rainbow Six* can go for broke with singleplayer so long as the multiplayer modes break even. With Red Storm in command and reportedly keen to make amends for its predecessor, *Vegas* can be expected to garner community support, and hopefully praise, similar to that of *Rainbow Six 3* and *GR:AW*. The entire singleplayer campaign can this time be fought co-operatively by up to four online players, while the recently favoured notion of the customisable online career will again be supported, Live users able to tailor their character's appearance and earn equipment and awards. The controversial run and gun of *Lockdown* is unlikely to be reprised, especially considering the heavily mo-capped, more realistic stride of the singleplayer team.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA/VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2007**

Half-Life 2: Episode Two

Having burned its bridges, Half-Life turns the heat on the great outdoors

Having craftily shredded its story into threads during *Episode One*, the series now has the pleasure of tying them back together. Much of *Episode Two* seems geared towards first establishing exactly where its characters ar



Narbacular crop

***Portal*, Nuclear Monkey's pseudo-sequel to the award-winning *Narbacular Drop*, isn't so much the icing on the *Episode Two* cake as a cherry atop the icing of *Team Fortress 2*. Bundling these three titles together looks certain to rank as Steam's finest hour, and shouldn't draw too many complaints from 360 and PS3 owners standing next in line. But what will it mean for Gordon Freeman? It's hard to imagine technology so perfectly suited to *Half-Life*'s appetite for weaponised physics not making it into *Episode Three*, or even perhaps an *Episode Two* climax. Valve's most recent comments suggest little more than an evaluation of its *HL2* compatibility, though drawing tentative parallels between Judith Mossman's arctic retreat and *Portals'* ivory tones is too tempting.**

Where do you go after City 17, when so much of what you've built has been destroyed? For Gordon Freeman and the refugees of *Half-Life 2*, it's a fated decision: you run to the woodland hills and catacombs, where the train tracks met *Episode One*'s explosive climax. If you're Valve, left without that symbolic frostbitten landscape – without the Citadel, even – you head back to the drawing board to sketch out another kind of magic.

Though the hand of Viktor Antonov may have a diminished hold over *Episode Two*, Valve's Spielbergian touch seems to have eagerly taken its place, drawing from the latest premise ideas fresh and yet relevant to its emerging timeline. So we discover that City 17 wasn't the heart and soul of *Half-Life 2* after all, but rather a chrysalis from which a new Combine hierarchy, now free of gangways, walls and telegraph wires, could explode. What's past really is prologue, it seems, and the measured setup of the series thus far – the gradual positioning of its people about its universe and the intricate staging of their diverse predicaments – looks set to pay off in spades.

Striders now roam en-masse, unconstrained by woodlands which, we're told, represent a new Source engine foliage system. Bipedal mechanised Hunters crash through the environment in pursuit of similarly-sized human prey, most vulnerable (or so we're shown) to scenic props hurled from the gravity gun. New 'cinematic physics' allow for the screen-spanning demolition of a three-storey barn house in a single Strider blast, and the Combine Overwatch are seen to consistently throw back more obvious grenade tosses.



Entirely absent from the last episode, vehicles such as the new Hybrid buggy goad you into flooring the accelerator, bowling a path straight through the toughened opposition

Valve hasn't missed the trick of playing this new boondocks ambience off against another, and a second demonstration at the Leipzig conference showed a lengthy subterranean tunnel shootout, widely expected to be the Antlion nest cut from *Half-Life 2*. If it prompts a concern, however, it's that the desire for contrast may have inserted a quite pedestrian corridor section into something otherwise dramatic.

But who among the faithful, having directed their Steam client towards the recently released second trailer, are even close to questioning that faith? Dog hurling himself at an inquisitive Strider, the return of the G-Man (with interest piqued by Alyx rather than Gordon), Eli Vance and Dr Kleiner watching the potential demise of Judith Mossman as their viewscreens flicker to



black, the large-scale emergence of the Vortigaunt resistance; who of those excited before isn't doubly so now?

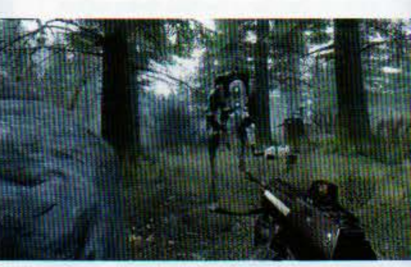
Together with its episodic distribution model, *Half-Life*'s known masteries of visual narrative and progressive design have made it an uncommonly reassuring prospect, one that strides assuredly without distraction or, now that it's underway, pause. Hints as to its final destination are littered throughout the previous games' commentary nodes, dialogue and background decals, not to mention the sporadic developer comments that have slipped through Valve's tight net. Regardless of whether the truth lives up to the speculation, it's been a long time since the speculation felt so good.



Strider Buster bombs couple payback with a twist – the longer you leave them attached to the target, the more power they drain and the greater the chances of a one-shot kill







Rumoured to be the first vehicle for a new wave of Source, *Episode Two*'s improvements range from subtle upgrades to striking overhauls. Dynamic lighting has noticeably improved



So photogenic is *Crysis* that picturing it flowing from one gun battle to the next, from one level to the next, can be tricky. The sooner it exits showroom mode and puts a more complete and playable build on display, the better

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E161, E164**

Crysis

Don't be alarmed if this latest glimpse falls short of expectations

The power of 10

Though it claims to support PCs up to two years old, *Crysis* is clearly just as concerned with future-proofing itself. DirectX 10 support will be integrated in the release build, though neither demonstrable code nor Vista machines to run it are available yet. Instead, there's a brief target clip of the aircraft carrier boss battle, entirely believable and quite overwhelming. Backing up claims by Yerli back in E161, DX10 simply offers more with which to fill the screen.

The love affair with CryEngine 2 continues unabated, at least with spectators. But as a unanimous vote picks the forest over the aircraft carrier and another *Crysis* presentation's buffered into memory, the murmur of admiration from this Leipzig audience joins a prominent sigh. "It's the trees, isn't it?" says Bern Diemer, the designer who's done this, you feel, one too many times. Ten minutes pass and the trees are chopped and blasted into logs, more out of anger, perhaps, than pride. Sunbeams warm the translucent leaves, enemies are dropped by remotely activated sedative darts, myriad details are lost in a motion-blurred dash to the finish, and any impression of *Crysis* the game is smothered by technology.

It's a sermon that begs for someone to switch off God mode and let a natural rhythm emerge, for the player to be afraid and the environment become more than just a toy. We see trucks ploughed into houses, pushing them apart like stacked cards, and grenade blasts used to make a rooftop spin in midair like a thaumatrope. But seeing such standard destructibility tests being applied to *Crysis* is a frustrating experience: this is the game in which the world is supposed to become both your sword and shield, not just a target.

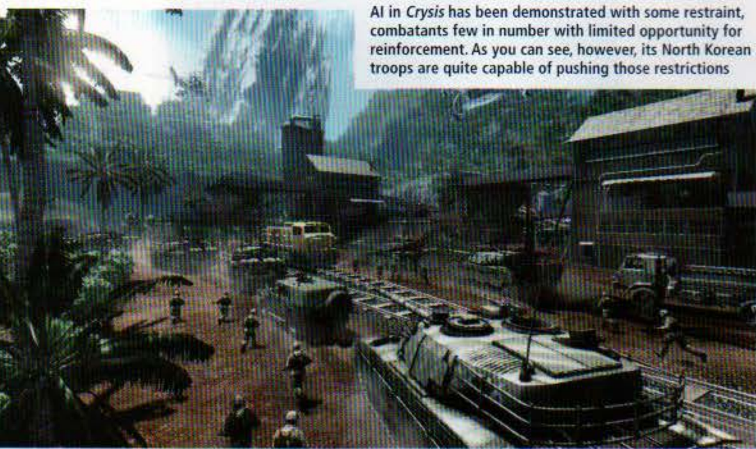
A multiplayer hands-on session predictably offers even less insight into AI behaviour, but it's an uplifting experience nonetheless – a chance to see the full gamut of DirectX lens effects applied to an array of natural and manmade surfaces, and to measure up Cevat Yerli's advocacy of videorealism over photorealism. Interestingly, *Crysis* achieves the first without consistently demonstrating the second, something perhaps attributable to its developer's love of hyper-real aesthetics. Glancing about a submarine interior, pressing an eye to a sniper scope, emerging from water, seeing explosions mix fire with earth: all are moments where, even in beta and without DirectX 10, the game fulfils its visual promise.

Beyond the eminent accessibility of its on-the-fly weapon and nanosuit interface, which can only improve when it's mapped to something other than a spongy mouse-wheel, *Crysis* multiplayer continues to feel unorthodox, building on the singleplayer design rather than simply interpreting it like *Far Cry*. This team assault mode alone has its share of tricks, some facilitated by technology, others simply by insight. A glance through the binoculars shows the map to be enormous, the space conventionally reserved for a skybox and static backdrop fleshed out in realtime. With the US boasting nanosuits and the North Koreans a factory to build more conventional weapons and vehicles, the game seems keen to prove that it can balance just as many opposing variables as an *Enemy Territory* or *Battlefield*. But again, we'll have to wait to find out if it can.

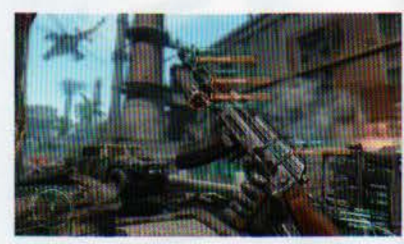
Crysis presentations seem destined to disappoint, not for what they show but for all that they leave out. And that's surely the idea. Crytek is building a vast resource, one that already begs to be explored, outsmarted, survived and savoured.



The forces at work in later confrontations – energy weapons, aerial combat, and dramatic shifts in material properties – are sure to take the second and third acts far beyond the first



AI in *Crysis* has been demonstrated with some restraint, combatants few in number with limited opportunity for reinforcement. As you can see, however, its North Korean troops are quite capable of pushing those restrictions



Even the close proximity of your weapon's modifiers can't make this a split-second procedure, but *Crysis* likes its realism to be thorough. Finding a spot where you can tweak without having your face blown off is half the fun

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 27**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Canis Canem Edit

Rockstar's notorious mischief-maker has a glint in its eye and a sting in its name





It's not yet clear how Jimmy's romantic life fits in, but the fact flowers can be bought and bums pinched suggests it will be an objective. Female characters are drawn with the same affectionate unkindness as everyone else



Play to learn

There are two lesson periods a day, which Jimmy can skip if he wants – at the risk of being caught, punished and having items confiscated. Truancy isn't really in your interests though, as the six subjects available – English, Art, Chemistry, Workshop, Photography and Gym – all level up Jimmy's skills via the medium of minigames. Chemistry's simple button-prompt mixing teaches him how to make firecrackers, while English class improves his ability to talk his way out of trouble. The latter's games of word scramble wouldn't be out of place in *Brain Training*, and are as far from the game's nefarious reputation as a corrupter of young minds as is possible to imagine.





Dog Eat Dog. The new Latin (and, appropriately, Europe only) title for the controversial school comedy formerly known as *Bully* could well be a not-so-subtle dig at whoever forced the change of name. It's almost deliberately unwieldy, a tacit hint of an unwilling change and invitation to continue to refer to it by the old title, which most will. Even after Hot Coffee, there are precious few who can tell Rockstar what to do (and their numbers certainly don't include tabloid newspapers or reactionary pressure groups) and, it seems, none who can get away with it without a sharp poke in the ribs.

The title is apt, at least. *Canis Canem Edit* is a broad, unruly satire on the cutthroat social structures of school days. Scowling oik Jimmy Hopkins isn't the bully but the bullied, an underachieving troublemaker who's packed off to a new boarding school by an uncaring mother and whose only goal is to make it through a school year unscathed and un-expelled. Beginning as the persecuted new boy, he soon elects himself defender of the hapless Nerds, and spends the game's five chapters trying to balance his reputation with them and the school's four other cliques – Jocks, Preppies, Greasers and Dropouts.

Canis Canem Edit borrows heavily from its stablemates. It is a junior *Grand Theft Auto* in structure, with a compact, lively playing field expanding to encompass the town near the school grounds, and an assortment of simple missions that earn cash and reputation: defend a Nerd from Jocks, race Greasers on bikes, run errands for masters. You'll also need to keep an eye on the clock, attend some lessons (see 'Play to learn') and stay out of too much trouble to avoid boring chores. At the game's heart, though, are *The Warriors'* lock-and-lamp fisticuffs, embellished with childish pranks and a system of vocal interactions that let you flirt, insult and pander your way through the day. As much as Rockstar stresses the bloodless, cartoonish violence and the severe penalties for hitting girls or small children, there's no denying the main image is of kids fighting, and that's all some will see.

The gameplay seems to be varied, solidly constructed and pretty throwaway light entertainment; the game's real substance is its style, an immaculate, ageless pastiche of every tale of teenage kicks from Grange Hill to Grease. The art direction, characterisation and original music are all superb, and despite the odd rude laugh and subversive twist, the whole has an air of innocent, exuberant nostalgia at ironic odds with its tabloid image as black-hearted bête noir.

Sports like dodgeball and (presumably) football feature, plus wrestling and boxing bouts. Outfits and haircuts are important, and will need to be changed for some tasks and to curry favour with cliques like the Preppies (top)



Jimmy's inventory includes projectile weapons like slingshots, eggs and stink-bombs, as well as a camera and a skateboard for getting around; melee weapons like baseball bats and bin lids are scavenged from the environment, while bikes are the best off-campus transport





FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3, PSP, XBOX, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E166**

Call Of Duty 3

The first true all-format release of a generation is fighting a war on three fronts, and it seems some campaigns are going better than others

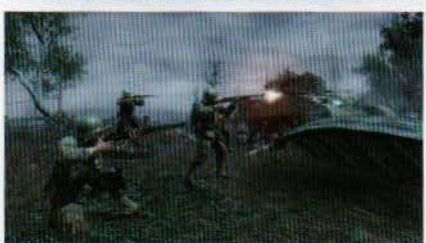
After a chance to get hands-on with the 360 version *Call Of Duty 3*, we have to wonder whether Activision has been a touch too successful in its mission to put players in the boots of Allied soldiers in the Normandy offensive of 1944.

Treyarch is bringing new narrative strength and focus across from its work on last year's *Big Red One* spinoff, although the unrelenting intensity is more reminiscent of Infinity Ward's headlining sequel. The shouts, the mud, the mess, the heart-in-mouth physical proximity of the action are all there. But the relentless, unvarying onward slog and the constant barrage of noise are more acquired tastes; and the confused sense of never quite being in control of what's happening – or even sure whether your shots are connecting – are not necessarily things you'd want to replicate at all. Audio-visually, though, it's overpowering – successfully trading a little finesse and detail for a combination of credibility and raw impact.

A somewhat reluctant demonstration of PS3 code brings us back to present-day battles with a jolt. With a painful framerate and only rudimentary lighting and shaders in place, the game looks cold and flat next to the gritty bombast of its 360 counterpart, and far from ready for a November launch. It's clear that it will be a race to the wire, in uncharted territory, to get it to match the 360's performance, let alone edge past it. It speaks volumes about the last-minute brinksmanship behind the launch of Sony's machine that such a high-profile, high-priority project had at time of asking only just gained access to the tilt-sensing technology, and had had no time to explore its implementation (or otherwise).

Ironically, if anything will help Treyarch to do that, it's the plentiful time it has spent familiarising itself with the Wii; some of that version's control flourishes (stances selected by raising and lowering the nunchuck, twisting the controller to steer) may be replicable in a hurry on Sony's device. Activision exudes quiet confidence about the Nintendo version – which is now confirmed as an end-of-year launch title, alongside the others – but can't show it, owing to Nintendo's tight rein on PR.





Multiplayer is in a different class to the last game's, supporting 24 players and eight (admittedly overlapping) character classes. It's still a rather rough-and-ready next to the dedicated likes of *Battlefield*, but should introduce a broad new audience to modern tactical multiplayer

Tingle RPG

From screen-shot oddity to dual-screen darling, the finished version of Tingle's solo adventure makes perfect nonsense



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **VANPOOL**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E166**

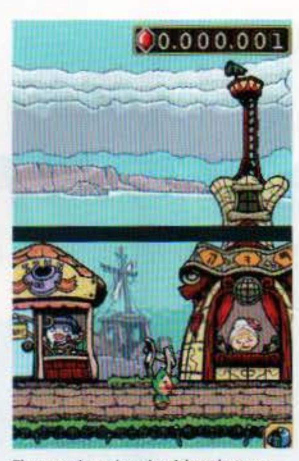


Dungeons are the most conventional elements of *Tingle's* gameplay. Every interaction in the game (pot-breaking, monster-fighting, chest-opening, menu and map use) is stylus controlled, with movement using the D-pad

The idiot's guide to the dynamics of the last generation went as follows: Sony had the brand, Microsoft had the muscle and Nintendo had the content. By content, people usually meant character roster, and the rehabilitation of Tingle is the proof of exactly that strength. An entirely minor, and mostly loathed, character from *Majora's Mask*, Tingle didn't seem to have much to offer. Like Wario, what he needed was a game that embraced his oddness and unpleasantness, and turned them into selling points. And so, transformed from a luckless nobody into a hero, Tingle sets out to fulfil the ancient RPG destiny of pot-smashing, villager-helping and monster-bashing.

What's most interesting is that Nintendo has let an external team – Vanpool – poke gentle, enthusiastic fun at the *Zelda* series. So Tingle's adventures require him to explore forests, fight the local wildlife and tackle dungeons full of switch puzzles, chests and doors that don't open until you've killed your assailants. The innovation is that Tingle has no health, only money which acts as both his wallet and life-force. Take a hit and you lose some rupees. Buy something pricey at a shop and you'll walk away low on energy and vulnerable to attack. This is combined with the fact that nothing has a fixed price. To get anyone to do anything – offer some advice, sell an item, fix a bridge – Tingle has to make an offer. Too low, and the person will pocket it without obliging. Too high and you'll have wasted valuable health. It's a fantastically lean piece of game design, but it does carry a few problems. The first is a risk of monotony, and the second is that resource management – that tiny terror every time an RPG asks you to decide whether to buy *this* weapon *here*, or save your pennies – is something many players already find tedious even when it isn't the main focus of a game.

But *Tingle* has plenty of distractions. It's one of the best-looking DS games so far, with particularly good sound design. And, besides *Zelda*, the influence of other RPGs is clear in the ingredient-collecting, potion-cooking subquests and the NPCs who join your quest along the way. There is no confirmation yet of a western release, but every reason to hope for one.



The game's art is at its richest in town, where both NPCs and architecture have strong characters. Here's hoping the excellent boxart will make it to the UK

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), NOVEMBER (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150**

Phantasy Star Universe

Think back to epic boss battles, great camaraderie, spectacular swords. And server queues and maintenance downtime and hackers...







The singleplayer game opens with an unprovoked attack on Ethan's home ship (above) by the mysterious SEED (top). Despite the outbreak of war, it proves robust enough to act as a spectacular hub for the rest of the game

Sometimes it seems that everyone has happy memories of *Phantasy Star Online* except its creator, Yuji Naka. For him, the stress of proofing the game against those few players who wanted to break it remains one of his strongest memories of the Dreamcast's defining online experience. And, for the first few weeks of *Phantasy Star Universe*'s Japanese PC and PS2 release, players could see his point. Servers were shut down after just a few days to allow the team to adjust to a much higher level of traffic than expected. A rollback followed, erasing progress, and – at the time of writing – the servers remain jammed, requiring repeated retries to gain access.

It's good news for those awaiting the western release, however, as players in North America and Europe can trust that Sega is using the intervening months to improve server stability and capacity. Part of the problem seems to stem from expectations that more players would focus on the offline, singleplayer game to start – much expanded and evolved compared to *PSO*'s rather dry training grounds – but the online allure has proved too strong. The main changes in the game are reflected in both modes, however. The most significant is the abolition of class types. All races (including Ethan, the human star of the offline game) can master any weapon or skill, but starting stats will skew each character towards particular strengths in melee fighting, gunplay or magic.

The other uniting fact is the visual disappointment. Recent games like *Yakuza* and *Final Fantasy XII* have shown how much the PS2 still has to give, and *PSO* set a high-water mark for the overall quality of game graphic design, but *PSU* fails to satisfy on both counts. There's no doubt it's vibrant and likable, but also no doubt *PSO* veterans will feel a small sting of disappointment amidst the pleasures of recapturing the chivalry and camaraderie of *PSU*'s distinctive online experience.





Boss battles – as in the original – are rather monotonous experiences in singleplayer, but come alive when fought with friends. Sadly, the server situation made it impossible to produce screenshots of online play, but it's worth noting that the character creation tool is a let-down, but only a tiny one, when compared to the beautiful, inventive concept art

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **XPLOSIV**
DEVELOPER: **RAZORWORKS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 27**

Ford Street Racing: LA Duel

Razorworks' thoughtful but lo-fi racing series finds itself a comfortable home on a hi-fi platform

Ford Racing has never been a series that can go panel to panel with the biggest racers out there, but that hasn't stopped its brand-focused garage and neat arcade challenges from fleshing out a niche. Often likeable but difficult to be passionate about, the *Ford Racing* franchise has always been professionally produced, more so than the surprising number of budget, manufacturer-faithful driving games that have appeared in recent years. And when it adopted *Street* as its middle name for its most recent PS2 instalment, the move proved to be anything but cynical, proffering a novel take on team racing that's continued in *LA Duel*.

Team races let the player swap between their squad of cars with just an upwards tap on the D-pad, allowing each vehicle to be manually steered to the front of the pack, or a rear-pack straggler pushed ahead by just enough positions to gain a winning score. Commands can also be issued, telling allies to block those behind them, or boost forward in a bid to slipstream and slingshot past you, dropping the defensive duties straight into your hands. It's effectively raucous – blocking results in plenty more spin-outs and stalls than these races would otherwise merit – and the relatively gentle track designs offer more legroom for concentrating on handling the pack. Whether those courses can manage to sustain interest in the singleplayer mode, though, is a concern; if that's justified, then wifi play could offer some compensation.

The level of detail to be found in *Ford Racing*'s environments is decent if rarely remarkable – a comment that looks set to hold on PSP – but it does mean that Razorworks' latest production has found a complimentary home on format that adds some vibrancy to its looks. And it feels like a better host for both the game's cleanly rendered vehicles and its accessibly relaxed handling model than Xbox or PS2. But, even with its refreshing take on team racing, the same question is always asked – whether the series can continue to provide enough variety and excitement to keep players other than Ford fetishists involved – still remains.

Alongside the inventive team play, a solo career (replete with dozens of challenges and championships) features a selection of modes related to those of previous games – duels, time trials and elimination events, but seemingly minus the exaggerated slipstreaming and icon collecting



***LA Duel* adds six new tracks to those of *Ford Street Racing* on PS2, along with six exclusive cars, for a total of 24. The variety of vehicles isn't as wide as that of *Ford Racing 3*, which is understandable given just how focused the PSP iteration is on city racing**



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **SANDLOT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2006**

The Chikyuu Boueigun X

After making a ten-kiloton impact on the PS2, the budget superweapon returns to the power of X

New weapons (in addition to the original's hefty arsenal) and vehicles will feature, although to date there's been an alarming absence of the Pale Wing jetpack division, the playable character of choice for most *CB2* devotees





The Chikyuu Boueigun is the heavyweight of D3's otherwise innocuous Simple Series, with its war of the worlds packing a punch kilotons beyond budget shovelware or cult curiosity.

The second PS2 title (reviewed in **E**154) showed such flair for size, spectacle, sound and fury – all for a ¥2,000 (£9) price tag – that it deservedly stormed to nearly a million copies sold, leaving big-name, big-budget titles (and the Japanese games industry's power players) flabbergasted in its dust. Simple by name and intent, with some local commentators describing it as 'a Mega Drive game rethought for 3D', in execution *CB2* was a next-gen concept waiting for the hardware to catch up with it, and its arrival on 360 is both welcome and expected. In fact, Sandlot could be justified in simply adding a pass of pixel shaders, porting the game verbatim, and pointing to those city-dwarfing motherships capsizing without the PS2 version's awed single-frame-count slowdown as a sign of next-gen mastery.

And yet *CBX* is to field considerably more enemies per stage – a statement that's cause for both anticipation and alarm, considering scarcity of enemies was the least of the series' concerns. Co-op play will also be reprised, now with squads of AI troops and team-ups over Live. In all, Microsoft may find that a true 360 killer app has arrived on a fraction of the budget apportioned to the titles groomed as such.





Totally (and inevitably) destructable environments, ludicrous boss sizes and, yes, moments of slowdown all make their return – only the hi-def sheen is all-new, but seems a perfect partner to the action

Onechambara VorteX

Japanese high concept at its most raw makes the jump from budget grindhouse to hi-def exploitation flick

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2006**

D3's other Simple title committed to Xbox 360 is, despite what the screenshots may suggest, a study in contradiction: Onechan, or 'Babe', originated as a satirical response to the growing criticism of violence in videogames.

By now a parody of itself, its appeal to a nobler cause isn't helped by its failings as a videogame, something that the ultraviolence can only cover with arterial spatter for so long. The pet project of Tamsoft – once a high-profile PlayStation developer by virtue of *Battle Arena Toshinden* closely following that machine's launch – both series and developer have stagnated, in contrast to Sandlot coming into its own with *Chikyuu Boueigun*. And while *VorteX* ups the enemy count and improves the fidelity of the quickly blood-drenched central character (a wealth of extra costumes will, of course, be provided), there's little sign of any more method behind its madness.

To be fair, there are flickers of absurd character where its PS2 forebears had only recycled assets: an undead killer whale boss, in particular, makes a compelling sublime/ridiculous argument. But it's hard to shake the sense that *Onechambara*'s joke is only on itself, a budget title geared for cheap appeal lacking either the heart of gold or repeatedly disposable thrills to justify the heftier price tag.

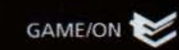
More's the pity that a concept like this one can't even register as a guilty pleasure – we wish a prospective *Zombie Vs Ambulance X* better luck.



Levels, enemies and lead are quickly submerged in gallons of splatter, but previous PS2 outings bizarrely failed to convey a real sense of hit connection



TITLE: **JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (CHICAGO)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**



GAME/ON

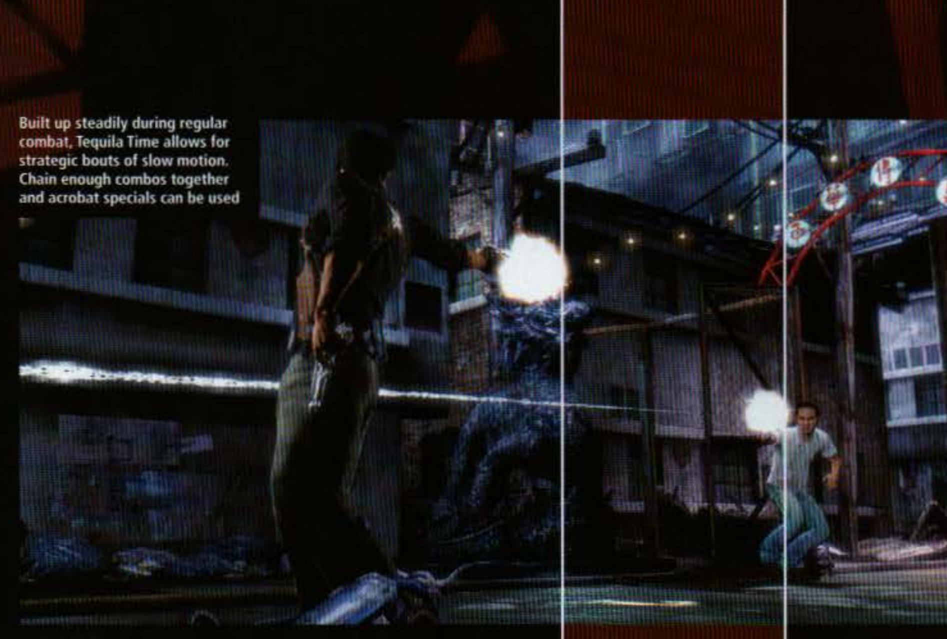
STRANGLEHOLD ISN'T JUST JOHN WOO'S GAME DEBUT: IT'S A SEQUEL TO HIS MOST CELEBRATED FILM. WILL MIDWAY UPHOLD ITS HONOUR?

"We'd just finished *Psi Ops*, and were looking around for something to do next," recalls **Brian Eddy**, project director at Midway's Chicago studio. "And we heard that **John Woo** had just been at E3 earlier that year, noticing that people were basically borrowing from his movies and thinking: 'I should just do a game.' It was the right time – we wanted to do something in the action realm – and what's better than to get John Woo himself? So we started talks, threw some ideas back and forth, and it just came together."

Yet *Stranglehold* – a direct sequel to Hard Boiled, Woo's fond farewell to Hong Kong before diving over to Hollywood – represents more for the director than just a reclamation of territory. "The continued interest in this story is very gratifying," he has said of the project. "It's like connecting with an old friend. In fact, exploring the story today opens up new possibilities, and a game allows me more flexibility in exploring that world. In the movie, the character of Tequila is fixed. The story is the same every time you watch it. A videogame allows the player to become the director. They can create their own scenes and add their own dimension and action to the character. Each time they play it can be a little different."

In reuniting Inspector 'Tequila' Yuen, Superintendent Pang, bullet ballet and so-called blood opera, *Stranglehold* wants to give more than just the *impression* of a Hard Boiled sequel. It doesn't want to sketch out its cop-on-the-edge hero with comic book cutscenes, or tire its players with rhythmic leaps to each point on the compass. And because it's the real deal, bearer of the licence so enviously eyed by *Max Payne* and *Dead To Rights*, it doesn't have to. Instead, it can concentrate on what's left to be done. Though the last decade's games have seen umpteen versions of the movie's teahouse opener, they've typically failed in one critical regard. The teahouse survives.

Hong Kong action, believes Midway, isn't just about men with guns, what they do, or even how they do it. It's about what they do it to, and what happens as a result. Which is where the wannabes stop and *Stranglehold* starts. Each level is like a doll's house full of ball bearings and matchstick men tossed into a spin-dryer, no one standing still for a second, nothing still standing at the end. "No matter how much we can do with action in movies," says Woo, "we are still somewhat limited. In videogames the action is unlimited. Being able to visualise choreography without limitations from actors or from CG film budgets is liberating."



Built up steadily during regular combat, Tequila Time allows for strategic bouts of slow motion. Chain enough combos together and acrobat specials can be used

They may have defined most of Woo's movies, but twin pistols aren't the only weapons available to the *Stranglehold* player. Automatic rifles can be seized from fallen foes, as can shotguns and RPG launchers

On one hand, it's hard not to imagine the creator of *Psi Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy* sharing that impression. There, after all, was a game in which Havok physics were the weapon, both for breaking boundaries of action design and breaking bones with telekinetic strength. Now here are 360 and PS3, with the power to show Havok what havoc really means. It's time to smash up that teahouse. But when you're working with Woo, with his very strict visual and thematic repertoire, what freedom do you really have to make the game you want?

"You know, he is and he isn't like that," says Eddy. "Some things he really likes to think about, just throwing out lots of different ideas on how he would portray something. He'll look at stuff and give comments and ideas – how he'd portray a certain camera or move in the game. And he's very hands-on with the storyline: he worked with us and with the people he typically uses in Hollywood. We went through lots of iterations of how we'd tie the script into the game – how we'd integrate the themes along with the big action scenes. And he used his storyboard guys, which helped tremendously."

For many gamers, only one of those themes is even remotely important. It may as well be blasted into stone as all ten of *Stranglehold*'s commandments. In the words of Superintendent Pang: "Give a guy a gun and he's Superman, give him two and he's God." Sitting down with one of the game's finished levels – fancy that, a teahouse – is quite revelatory, showcasing a triumph of breathless simplicity in an enormously complex world. Played in voice and likeness by a returning Chow Yun-Fat, Tequila is like a man of steel with the properties of water, flowing over tables, up banisters, through windows and down from overhead lanterns with only basic movements of the analogue stick and single button-presses.

"We actually started off," says producer **Alex Offerman**, "before we had Unreal Engine 3, blocking out the levels in *Unreal Tournament 2004*, making sure the lines of sight were really good. We'd have most of the designers playing as enemies and one guy playing as Tequila, mimicking the way we wanted the AI to feel. Then we'd take screenshots and give those to the concept artists, who'd paint over them. They'd then go to the UE3 level designers, who'd recreate them exactly. So if you ever see concept art from the game, that's what it'll look like – it's a really cool process."

And is UE3 really as versatile as Epic likes to suggest? "It's great from a rendering standpoint," explains Eddy, "because you can make some beautiful things. But as with every engine, you have to make some trade-offs regarding where you're going to put that power. Do you want to take the graphics up to 11, but then not have enough to throw loads of guys in there? Or do you want to spread it out, *GTA* style, and pull those graphics down? With next-gen, for the first time, everyone wanted everything to be 11, which isn't realistic. I think it's

"WE CAN ALWAYS BE PUSHING OURSELVES TO MAKE SOMETHING BETTER. IF YOU DON'T DO THAT, YOU'LL NEVER GET TO AAA QUALITY."

CHOKE POINTS

Action gamers have had their fingers burned so often by half-hearted vehicle sections that it's a wonder they can play them through the scar tissue, but *Stranglehold* feels justified in taking the risk. "If you watch a lot of John Woo's early movies, they all have vehicle combat in some way or other," notes Eddy. "So that's what we're pulling from. We're not trying to do a racing game – it's combat from vehicles in a way that's Hollywood. We want to be sure it's of the same quality level as everything else. We want it to be the case that every time you go to someplace new, there's something different, be it an outside, inside or vehicle, new powers or new interactions."

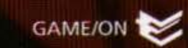


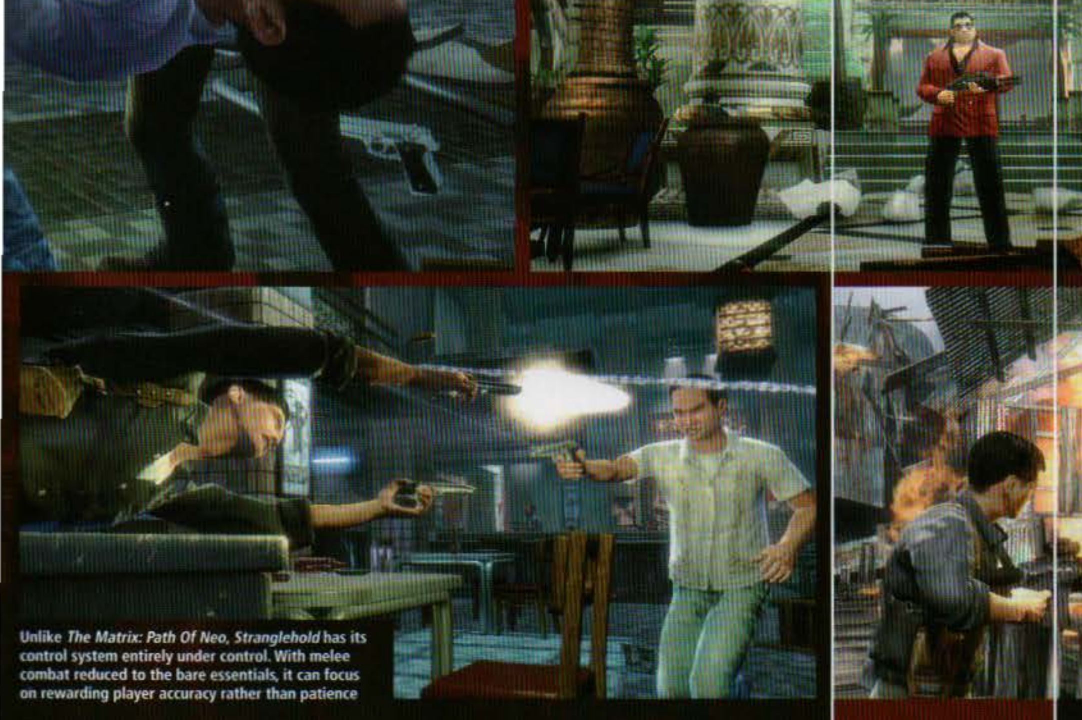






Alex Offerman (left) and Bryan Eddy (middle) made names for themselves and their team at Midway Chicago with *Psi Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*. John Woo (right) made his with movies like A Better Tomorrow and Once A Thief





Unlike *The Matrix: Path Of Neo*, *Stranglehold* has its control system entirely under control. With melee combat reduced to the bare essentials, it can focus on rewarding player accuracy rather than patience

"Since pretty much everyone died at the end of Hard Boiled," laughs Eddy, "there weren't too many characters to carry over, so that offered us some freedom"

up to every individual and team to make those decisions."

This sounds like the voice of experience. Can we assume that *Stranglehold* was once an '11' game? "Yup, it always happens. But that's what it should be, so we can always be pushing ourselves to make something better. If you don't do that, you'll never get to AAA quality."

Hand in hand throughout the demo, which is well into its tenth minute and still churning out new debris upon old, are two concerns. What of chemistry, and what of variety? Here, in this enclosed space, where everything is arranged with movie set precision, there is an abundance of both: the actions of player and opposition gel perfectly with the environment and the interactive furniture within. But what lies beyond? Tell us it isn't corridors.

"I think you'll be heavily surprised," says Eddy. "We have more stuff up and running than what we've shown so far – some more outdoor areas that are a little bit different. Doing an outdoor area means you can't do everything the same way. You can't condense [the action] like you would in the teahouse, so you just have to go bigger. So you have lots of giant neon signs that you can shoot, which collapse and kill people. Your attacks still chain together, but in more interesting ways. You can run a path along pipes, across rooftops and over fences, or start shooting up the rooftop you're standing on to take out guys below you.

"We have certain stop gates that prevent you going too far forward, and contain the battle to certain areas. So the game is linear, but encapsulated in these little sandboxes. They're natural boundaries: we've tried as much as possible to stop it feeling like you're in a tunnel the whole time. And it's not easy."

In the teahouse, there can't be more than two of the available interactions that require a second try. The stunts here are the means rather than the end, though that never stops them from being the game's greatest reward. As in Namco's *Urban Reign*, a combo only has to be logically possible for it to be achievable.

ONCE A THIEF?

Stranglehold isn't the first western videogame to take its cues directly from the stars of eastern cinema. Did Jet Li vehicle _Rise To Honor_ ever serve as reference? "We took a look at it," says Eddy. "It's definitely a different kind of game to ours, more hand to hand. But you know _Power Stone_? There was a vague inspiration there; a lot of stuff going on in that game. We're trying to do things that games haven't done before. At least not in the mix, because people have these ideas and it's how you put them together that makes it work or not work. We've done a ton of focus testing, we just had an internal review: we have completed a lot of the other features that you haven't seen yet. We're pretty much focused on finishing missions and levels now."

Running up the bannister, off onto the swinging lantern, and down onto a serving trolley which then carries you across the floor, guns akimbo the whole time, is easy. It's with some surprise, however, that we kick this madness off to see the bannister become a blazing strip of light as we come near, highlighting the interactivity. Is that entirely necessary?

"We found that when you didn't have the tracks on," says Offerman, "you could run up to a railing and miss it 'cause you weren't in the right position. We may have an option to turn it off – I know the artists would love that, and some people like their games without HUDs. But I like them – I like to know how much health I have. There are things you can avoid, but it doesn't necessarily make the experience better. Games are games, films are films – that's how it is."

Having wiped out a whole *Gungrave* of enemies without a thought of what our hands were doing, we're won't argue. And hell, in a game where the weather forecast may as well read 'sparks', why not have neon stairs?

ROLLING THUNDER

SONY IS OUT TO PROVE THAT PS3 CAN TAKE ON ANY CHALLENGE, BUT CAN IT HANDLE THE RAGE OF MOTOR STORM?



Sony likes to tell people what they want, be it higher-than-high definition movies, all-in-one entertainment platforms, or simply the name emblazoned on the box. Its message for those floating consumers: get used to it – you'll thank us in the end. It's naturally a difficult line to uphold or refute, though heaven knows there are plenty who think that they can. But it does open up a void in a place commonly referred to as 'now'. With news of shipment problems, territorial delays and abandoned launch titles, there's little of the now about PlayStation 3, despite the clock ticking ever closer to its November launch date.

The time has come when many are tiring of the hype, and instead hoping for something more than numbers, promises, upturned crabs or PSP wing mirrors. Which is something that Sony has found hard to produce in its latest fight against Microsoft: some kind of proof that next-gen really doesn't start until the Japanese manufacturer says it does. Something, perhaps, like *Motor Storm*.

What you get from this game, previously suggested but never expected, is a very real sense of superiority. Perhaps not in the long run, but certainly as a launch title – as a statement of intent. Though still in pre-beta, it's a brute – seemingly capable of guillotining residual doubts as to PS3's potential with intimidating ease. If Microsoft, lacking direct opposition for its 360 launch back in November 2005, built fireworks to celebrate, then Sony has built a howitzer.

So, question one: How? *Motor Storm* has several strengths that combine to great effect, but realism is its most immediate. Not of the kind you're used to, mind, such as high-resolution textures, depth of field effects and splodges of motion blur. They play their parts, for sure, and the normal-mapped textures of the game's Monument Valley in fact exhibit the same varnished look that you *are* used to. But what's real about *Motor Storm* is, in a word, everything. It just doesn't feel like it's made out of videogame parts, so thorough is its use of those modern rendering



TITLE: **MOTOR STORM**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **EVOLUTION STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER (US, JAPAN), MARCH 2007 (UK)**





Evolution cites the balancing of the different vehicle classes, or to be more precise their AI drivers, as the biggest challenge. You come to appreciate this when three different vehicles fly apart further down the track, everyone else slamming into erratic swerves as the terrain is transformed by wreckage. It's even suggested that there could be times when the respawn capability of AI cars is disabled, their dismembered vehicles left as permanent trackside features



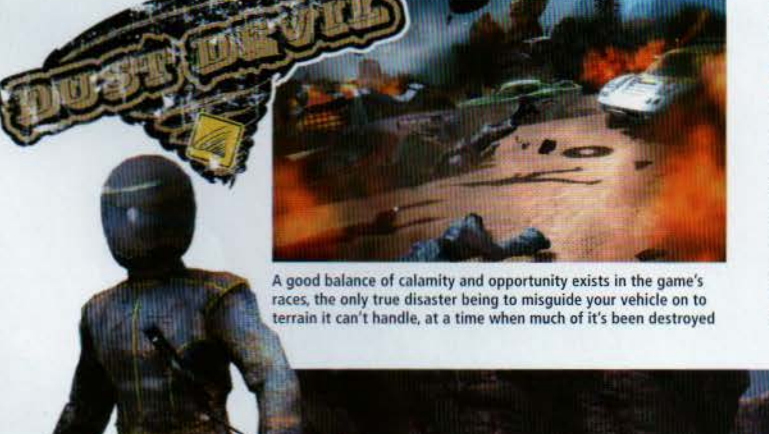
DUEL FORMAT

How often is it that a racing game treats you to so much singleplayer novelty that the multiplayer modes feel superfluous? Surely *Motor Storm*'s online play, with up to 12 (at the moment) competitors and entirely faithful to the solo experience, will prove a hit with early PS3 adopters keen to compare its network functionality with that of Xbox Live. One interesting prospect is that of more direct contests between different vehicle classes. Evolution suggests big rig versus bike races as one example, the latter getting a head start before their car-crushing opponents give chase. Memories of Terminator 2 spring to mind, though how the trucks are supposed to catch the bikes that successfully maintain the high ground is a mystery.

methods, and so qualified the team at the controls. Consider Evolution Studios, noted for a high bar of visual realism, schooled in the art of pushing and optimising PS2 software by five years of *WRC*, yet suffocated by that licence.

"There were a lot of things we wanted to pour into *WRC* that obviously, due to the nature of the sport, weren't appropriate," explains producer **Simon Benson**. "For example, multiple vehicles: we always wanted to crash one vehicle into another – you know, instant spectacle. In *WRC*, the crashes were always into the environment, but that's a very negative thing for the player – you don't gain any benefit. We'd modelled the vehicles to such a degree, right through the *WRC* series, but there was that line you couldn't cross. So carrying that same depth of detail in the models, but then allowing it to splinter into millions of pieces, and throwing those into the springs of everything around – that built to the point where it effectively exploded like a cork out of a bottle as we came to this."

Game director **Matt Southern** agrees: "Right from the start it's been shot through with this feeling of liberation. And that's not to damn the licence, because the licence brings you all the benefits. But



A good balance of calamity and opportunity exists in the game's races, the only true disaster being to misguide your vehicle on to terrain it can't handle, at a time when much of it's been destroyed





Hammering of the context-sensitive abuse button isn't necessary if you just want a little personality on display. Even when they're obscured by doors and windscreens, *Motor Storm*'s ragdoll drivers are always leaning one way or other, glancing at the nearest rival

now it's: 'Where's that wishlist we were building? Let's start ticking those wishes off. Remember all those things we removed from the feature list, like deformation and a real sense of place in a physical environment? Let's put those back in.'"

Not to undervalue its long-term prospects, but there's an awful lot of now about *Motor Storm*. Temptations to brand it a battle racer – the term popularised by *Burnout*'s recent desire to essentially blow itself to kingdom come – don't survive for long. That genre suggests speed, sparks and no small degree of fragility, with paper-light cars exploiting a weakened sense of gravity. But everything in this game has weight – convincing, frightening weight.

Dwarfed by the precipices of Monument Valley, whether they be above or below the track, races here are sensory juggernauts always on the attack. As vehicles – seven different classes, all racing at once – tip over, every momentum shift of the chassis can be felt and every shorn component seen. Doors thrash back and forth before freeing themselves of their wrenched hinges, exposing ragdoll drivers glancing at the nearest threat. Fuel spills and burns behind cars, not just for effect but to

Several different models exist within each of the vehicle classes, some new, some old, but a fictitious. Over 150 liveries will be available fo each, and more are being strongly tipped for availability as future downloadable content

warn everyone that an overzealous use of thrust, which in this game is volatile but unlimited, is about to backfire. Skies pulse and wash over with HDR sunlight, one minute empty and white, the next cloudy and blue. People fall and are thrown, their heads crushed by a tumult of tires, their bodies folded by rock.

But while we may have doubted it once, we've seen all this before. The second question, then: What is *Motor Storm*, beyond a video shown at E3 2005 and a game that looks remarkably similar?

More than you might think, it turns out, heir to a charisma shared by games such as *Mario Kart*, *Twisted Metal*, *Rock 'N' Roll Racing* and *Nitro*. Its premise is a festival, of the Gumball variety, that seeks to mutilate and shatter Monument Valley by day and party on its remains at night. Each of the eight key tracks has been characterised to make it as much a combatant as its guests, and each race series is presented, literally, as a ticket – a chance to win points that will gradually buy you every aspirational driver and individualised car that you see.

Reward in *Motor Storm* isn't so basic, however, as to solely exist in unlockable extras. A game of secrets and opportunities, its tracks are thoroughly dynamic. So in addition to steering clear of the mud basins and keeping to the surrounding plateaus, the dirt bike rider has to also adapt to the ever-changing layout of this physical world. Likewise, a rally car driver can't just sit back and keep to the flattest rock. A crash can open a shortcut – a treacherous jump or breached wall – through which only the smallest vehicles can pass. A big rig may smash through a graveyard of cars, sending tangled metal all over a chicane, and what was once the optimum route is suddenly a deathtrap. Even before the tyre tracks lacerate and loosen the mud, every class of vehicle is faced with a challenge thick with strategy. What once seemed a subgenre to rank alongside battle racing now seems something altogether greater.

"A subgenre has these connotations of being

WHAT IS MOTOR STORM BEYOND A VIDEO AT E3 2005 AND A GAME THAT LOOKS REMARKABLY SIMILAR?





BACK IN BLACK

Tucked away in Evolution's office, running its own version of *Motor Storm* from a Blu-ray disc and hooked up to a 720p display, a final debug PS3 unit demands that our tour takes an impromptu break. On the outside it's glossy, fingermarked and sometimes a little fragile, the flap across the front ports as cheap a component, in both feel and look, as we've encountered on a recent console. It's essentially everything that early photographs have shown, but with one considerable twist: the machine is a silent runner. First we ask for the windows to be closed, shutting out the nearby shredder, then the desk fan, which leaves us with just the PS3. Even with an ear pressed to the admittedly rather warm grille along the console's edge, there's little to hear. The reason: a wealth of sound-proofing packed around the chassis interior, or so we're told. That would explain the machine's incredible weight – it's heavier than 360 by a stretch. Also worth considering is the workload of the unit, which 360 owners will readily cite as a key noise factor. For most of this encounter, PS3 runs a basic version of the PSP XMB, with little difference beyond its scale and backdrop – a plain black wallpaper.

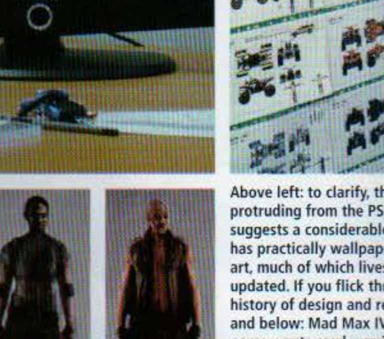


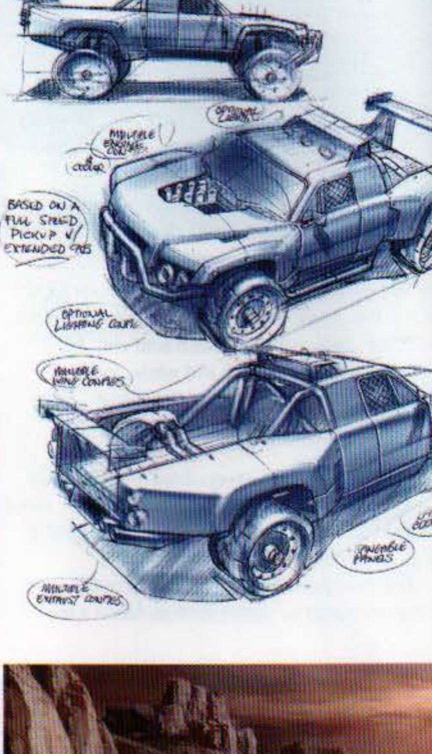


From left: producer Simon Benson, programmer Scott Kirkland and game director Matt Southern. The ease with which Evolution is handling the game is a testament to its in-house talent, but also to the five years it spent chasing the dream of photorealism in racing games, albeit under the WRC licence's terms







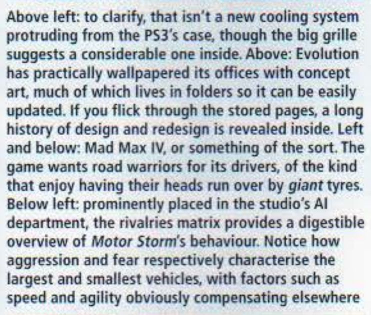


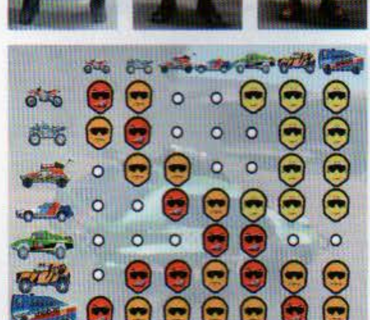
Above left: to clarify, that isn't a new cooling system protruding from the PS3's case, though the big grille suggests a considerable one inside. Above: Evolution has practically wallpapered its offices with concept art, much of which lives in folders so it can be easily updated. If you flick through the stored pages, a long history of design and redesign is revealed inside. Left and below: Mad Max IV, or something of the sort. The game wants road warriors for its drivers, of the kind that enjoy having their heads run over by *giant* tyres. Below left: prominently placed in the studio's AI department, the rivalries matrix provides a digestible overview of *Motor Storm*'s behaviour. Notice how aggression and fear respectively characterise the largest and smallest vehicles, with factors such as speed and agility obviously compensating elsewhere



AN UNFORTUNATE TURN

Sat down at the bottom of the debug menu, unwieldy and still something of a novelty to Evolution's staff, *Motor Storm*'s tilt control system is as patent an afterthought as you'll ever see. There are those who confirm, with evidence to hand, that yes, it does become more intuitive with practice. But doubt seems widespread, and for good reason. Though you're able to tip the PS3 pad forward and back to adjust your weight on the smaller vehicles, there's a clear issue with sensitivity that might never be resolved. Do you have it so a player must really crank the pad to turn the wheel, potentially tiring them out and reducing precision, or do you advocate smaller movements, lessening the natural feel? At present, nobody seems 100 per cent sure.

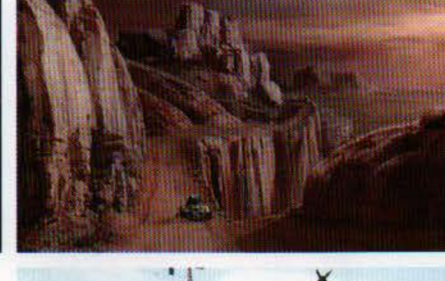
















quite niche and specialist," says Southern. "Rally was a subgenre, and there's no shame in saying it. But subgenre doesn't necessarily mean niche. You could play *Half-Life* and call it a firstperson shooter subgenre, when in actual fact it's something that breaks down barriers and becomes something in and of itself. And that's absolutely the aim for *Motor Storm.*"

Has Evolution been keeping an eye on its former genre competitors, some of whom aren't exactly resting on their laurels when it comes to technology? "Will Wright gave a legendary lecture at GDC about design," Southern recalls, "and I was lucky enough at the end to ask him: 'You talk about your inspirations, but none of them are other games.' And he said that when you take influence from other games, you inbreed. Remembering that scene in Deliverance, I decided that wasn't good. So one of our designers has a degree in geology, other staff have come from British Aerospace; we've got an ex-rally champion just next door. We run cars down at Alton Park, and do as many things as possible beyond games."

"The interesting thing about being first on a console is that you're very short of any metric of how well you're doing," adds Benson. "You see the titles and hear what they're going to do, but you don't really have anything to back those words up. When we were at E3 this time round, we started hearing about Sega, and we'd heard that someone else was doing deformation. It didn't surprise us, because people have been asking for this for so long. But that's one part of a suite of technologies that make up *Motor Storm.*"

On which note, it's time for some tech-porn. One of *Motor Storm*'s Monument Valley locations will typically comprise a quarter of a million polygons, but its 12 surface types, including all the deformation effects and attributes they exhibit, are created dynamically and exclusively by the RSX GPU. Everything beyond the bare rock of a track represents a programmable shader at work, even the pits and troughs created by vehicles that have entirely believable, long-lasting effects on handling. Mud

EVERYTHING BEYOND THE BARE ROCK OF A TRACK IS A SHADER AT WORK EVEN THE PITS CREATED BY VEHICLES

sticks to cars where it's flung from the ground, remaining there until they crash, at which point the car is respawned with a fresh lick of paint, ready to be muddied all over again. All the while, the action moves at a fixed 30fps. Please don't start.

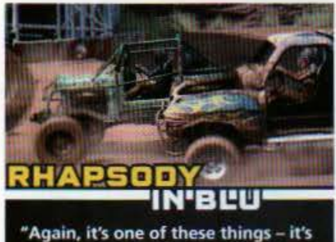
What the team refer to as a substantial, next-

Details regarding possible replay modes are sketchy, but the team is prioritising efficient, cinematic crash replays over the drawn-out kind you see in shop windows. The technology is there, however

A capture of the game running in debug mode draws out its thought processes for all to see. Bringing such reactive AI aggression to this open terrain is an unprecedented step, and it says much of the Cell's computational brawn

HEAVY METAL NOISE POLLUTION

Thanks to a bundle of digital sound effects that Evolution's calling Live-Fi, music in *Motor Storm* comes not from the speakers in your car (or wherever on a dirt bike you'd put them) but from an array of speakers somewhere in the valley, pumping both crowd and drivers with raucous, festive spirit. By adding a measured amount of reverb and delay to the game's licensed soundtrack, it does much for the game's atmosphere, even if it's something of a common feature in most modern music players. Also, while the serrated riffs of Curve, Nirvana and Lunatic Calm are entirely suited, Live-Fi seems wasted without custom soundtrack support, which we're told doesn't feature. And there's us scrabbling for that copy of Badmotorfinger. Come on, Evolution, we know you're reading this.



RHAPSODY IN BLU

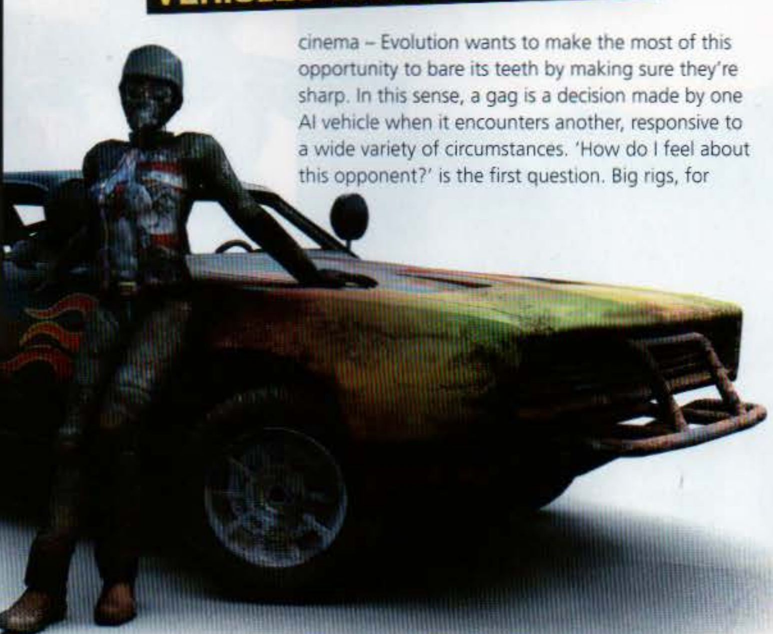
"Again, it's one of these things – it's a great opportunity like 1080p," says Southern when asked about Blu-ray. "These things are all here to be exploited. But like with PS2 development, as soon as you hit the barriers you've got to spend an awful lot of creative energy knocking those barriers down." With impeccable timing, programmer Scott Kirkland enters the room. "One of the things Blu-ray lets us do is get every single version of the game on one disc," he says. "We're pretty set on having one version of the *Motor Storm* binary for all territories, though, so it's not really going to help us this time. We've got lots of ideas for future products, where we're looking at streaming texture and geometry data from the Blu-ray into the hard drive cache, but I don't think *Motor Storm* is going to push that."

generation hit on the Cell processor, however, is AI – arguably *Motor Storm*'s most compelling asset. The game's drivers don't want to toe the racing line despite the opposition, nor are they content to measure revenge as a simple tally born of routine nudges into walls. These vehicles *hate* each other.

Referring to so-called 'gags' – impromptu yet memorable moments commonly associated with

THE GAME'S DRIVERS DON'T WANT TO TOE THE RACING LINE. THESE VEHICLES HATE EACH OTHER

cinema – Evolution wants to make the most of this opportunity to bare its teeth by making sure they're sharp. In this sense, a gag is a decision made by one AI vehicle when it encounters another, responsive to a wide variety of circumstances. 'How do I feel about this opponent?' is the first question. Big rigs, for



example, detest the bikes that are in turn petrified o them. 'What's my position in relation to theirs?' 'What scenery is available for potential collisions?' 'Which route would cause them the most trouble?' 'Can I co-operate with another vehicle?' All of these play a part, and it's said that over 80 gags exist purely for ramming scenarios.

Additionally, a context-sensitive Square button command is available to the player for the purpose of antagonism. You can press it when behind a car and the horn will sound, alongside one and you'll lean over and flip the bird through the windscreen, in front and you'll perform a cutthroat gesture. Bikers, it's suggested, will even clothesline each othe from their rides. It's gratifying enough to have us mashing the button at the earliest opportunity, but crucially it's the AI that takes offence. At earlier difficulty settings, its simulated aggression will occu largely around the player, but later it'll be targeted a them. The trick, we're told, is to establish this behaviour on screen so as to be noticed.

This visit doesn't really allow us to scrutinise *Motor Storm*'s AI, but what's immediately clear is that neither action nor aggression are in short suppl during its races, and the consequences appear endlessly versatile. There's every chance that this wil be the genre game to complicate AI routines to the point that they're genuinely capable of surprise, eve after months of play. Which begs the third question what is *Motor Storm* not?

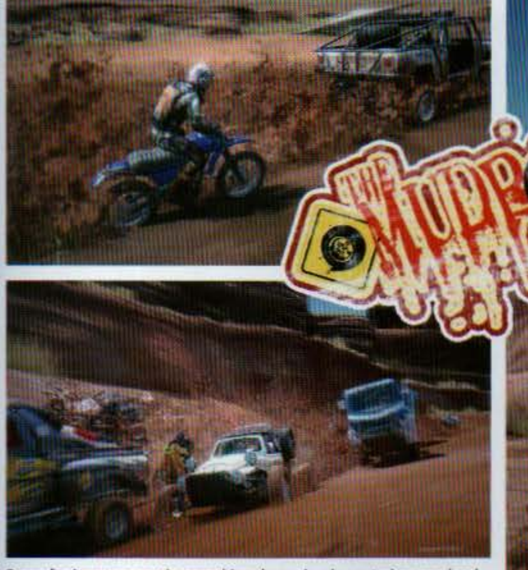
As many will have anticipated, it's not going to be enjoyed in 1080p. "1080p, I think, has got an awful lot of future – lots of positives," believes Benson. "We decided on 720p very early on in the project. What you find now is that you're starting t







Validating the concept of aesthetic consistency without using it as an excuse for laziness, *Motor Storm* is integrating bespoke work from street artists such as the 123klan, Dope, Trice, Burp, Wisk, and Laze into its environmental decals



Room for improvement is something these visuals are trying very hard to squeeze out, but they're not perfect. Mud can sometimes look more like candy floss as it's churned by tyres, and shadows can drop into low resolutions. This is pre-beta code, however, so touch-ups are inevitable

get TVs that say: 'Yes, we are true HD – we're native 1080p.' But if you try and actually find one, they're rare. So it's very much a breaking technology. Really, if you're outputting a 1080p image, you need a very large set to resolve it. Go for something smaller and you won't differentiate it so much. But looking to the future, it might very well go that way for us."

Another thing *Motor Storm* isn't, of course, is tactile. How does a team like this react when the rug of rumble support is pulled from under its feet? Philosophically, it seems. "I have to say, I've not really noticed its absence," says Southern. "Haptic outputs are interesting, but not core to most gameplay experiences, which are after all about rewarding interactions, preferably with an incredibly compelling, coherent and believable world. Because you're getting that, you're not really missing some of the, should we say, 'soft' innovations you've been getting in the past. It's the same as watching movies – you don't have any form of tactile sense when you're watching a movie but you can still immerse yourself very deeply."

People will scoff at what's clearly an optimistic, somewhat pressured response, but there's an element of truth to it. As an immersive tool, rumble isn't essential. Never, during several retrievals of our jaw from the ground, do we find ourselves noticing the lack. But there's a question to be asked regarding rumble as an informative feedback device, and how well *Motor Storm*'s many surface types can be identified, in a split second upon contact, through visual output alone. At least when we change the subject to cameras – specifically why the cockpit view of the 2005 video is no longer available (instead there's two views: bonnet and chase) – the answer makes perfect sense.

"There are a wide variety of views in there – that view we had then was in a buggy, so you had a very open cockpit, wing mirrors, and it was very easy to be aware of your surroundings. Transfer that into a big rig and the same thing doesn't work, because how do you see a little biker alongside you – how do you see the cliff edge? We looked into all this, and realised that as soon as you start thinking about the other vehicles, and what restrictions they place on you, it isn't one size fits all. It's about situational awareness – knowing all your quadrants."

Reassuringly, the one thing *Motor Storm* isn't most of all is a drummer boy for either Sony or PS3. It's Evolution's game – its breakthrough and escape. It doesn't showcase any one feature or rendering technique, or pander to a convenient market with an eye for bling (rides aren't pimped here, they're disembowelled). It doesn't stop thinking when it achieves that almighty sensory hit.

So we end where we began, celebrating the game's next-gen credentials but questioning their significance for PS3. *Will* next-gen only start when this machine says it does? "Personally, I don't think it's a question for us to answer," says Southern. "It's for people out there, beyond these four walls. All we've done is the best we can with the time and the people. We know full well that next generation PlayStation 3 titles will get better and better still, so there's probably a lot more to come. The key thing to me at the moment, looking at the forums, is that people still don't accept our screenshots as being realtime. If you look at it that way, then we're clearly doing something right."

RAINGOD MESA





A lengthy CG clip runs in the background while you flick through the game's front-end, painting a vivid picture of the *Motor Storm* festival as it ushers in the night. It's a positive sign for a launch (or thereabouts) title, ticking all the boxes that launch titles often miss. Wisely separating fantasy and ambition, it also indulges more extreme ideas without trying to crowbar them into gameplay































Illustration: Peter Crowther



ALL SYSTEMS GO

MUGGINGS, ORGANISED CRIME AND ATTEMPTED SUICIDES: CONSOLE LAUNCHES HAVE A VARIED HISTORY. BUT AFTER THE CROWDS HAVE DEPARTED, DO THEY REALLY HAVE MUCH IMPACT ON THE LIFE OF A CONSOLE?

On rare occasions, the disparate voices that make up the internet gaming community come together. *Half-Life 2* had everyone united in anticipation. The Wii had everyone joined in confused giggling. And as of early September, Sony had become the focus of everyone's attention. Building over weeks and months, the consensus was suddenly everywhere: PlayStation, the most powerful force in videogames for two hardware generations, was in big trouble.

The evidence certainly seemed to add up. Rumours of enormous production costs had been circling for months. The absence of substantial details about the online service were disturbing, as were details emerging about the performance of Blu-ray technology. An interview with Kaz Hirai, president of SCEA, revealed that, as of late August, Sony had yet to begin manufacturing consoles. And then, on September 6 came the news that the European launch would be delayed until March 2007.

Such problems make one thing clear: the PS3's launch will be the most closely scrutinised in the history of videogames. Endlessly interpreted at the best of times, hardware launches are now pored over like tealeaves for signs of the console's future. They breed rumour, create myths and turn everyday gamers into pundits.

Launches are in effect a console's birth, and that anaolgy holds out – with perhaps a bit more pain for the participants and a lot more embarrassing for anyone forced to watch. Recent examples have certainly been intense and elaborate. Microsoft's first attempt stained Times Square green, right down to the doughnuts and hotdog vendors. People queue, camp out and even (in the case of Xbox's Seamus Blackley) get engaged at launches. The N64 launch was such a white-hot media event that news crews were dispatched to film boxes being loaded onto a plane, a symbol of excitement so heavily abstracted

THE PRICE IS TIGHT

Of all the problems the PS3 faces, the £400+ price tag is perhaps the most criticized, although it's unlikely to suffer the same fate as the 3DO, which drowned under the weight of its $699 release price. Console pricing has always been a delicate business. The original PlayStation's $100 undercutting of the Saturn is seen as a crucial factor it its early success, and the GameCube's hasty price cuts prior to its European launch were interpreted as panic by many. Cutting the price just after a release is an even trickier business, though, as Microsoft found out when Xbox dropped from £299 to £199 a month after its debut. In order to appease early adopters, 'thank-you' packages, consisting of two games and an extra controller, were issued.


Since the SNES took Japan by storm, crowd scenes have been the hard currency of console launches. PS2 went one step further, as befits a next-gen system, by providing a near-riot, too

that the fan-fever that demanded this level of coverage must have truly been colossal.

The PS2's Japanese launch stands out as gaming's least stable foray into global media events. On March 4 2000, crowds flooded Tokyo's Akihabara. The sky was filled with news helicopters, police were called following reports of robberies and at least one mugging was reported. Finally, a man who discovered his preorder would not be honoured attempted suicide by leaping from a building. Even though he survived, the day still passed off like a queasy combination of a royal family funeral and the Incident in Raccoon City. It also resulted in roughly 980,000 consoles being sold in just 48 hours.

Similarly, last year's 360 launch, with its aims of a worldwide near-simultaneous release, may have been considered a success by many, but it's likely that those who went without a machine over Christmas would disagree. Launches are where the pristine visions created by months of planning meet the harsh realities of production shortages and transportation snarl-ups – where dreams intersect abruptly with the real world. They're a chance to see gaming at its most euphoric, but also to catch a glimpse of the boom and bust mania that lurks behind the plastic and wires. And they're getting bigger all the time, with the 360 breaking all manner of sales records and putting the onus on its rivals to keep upping the ante. Hardware launches are not going to disappear any time soon, but what remains unanswered is just how important a role they really play. Can they truly be seen as an indicator of the console's lifespan? Which elements make the difference between success and failure? Crucially, ha any launch ever really gone according to plan?

In the earliest days of videogames, consoles didn't even have launches, simply appearing on shelves overnight. For consumers, it was like waking up to discover a surprise snowfall. For the manufacturers of those strange and distant pioneers the major struggle was in getting the shops to stock their product in the first place. Once Sears or K-Mart had agreed, the console was put out and left to fend for itself. Often, there was little or no advertising: if anybody in the world was hotly anticipating the Fairchild Channel F, chances are that

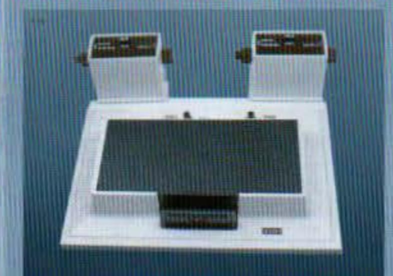
LAUNCHES ARE WHERE THE PRISTINE VISIONS CREATED BY MONTHS OF PLANNING MEET THE HARSH REALITIES OF PRODUCTION SHORTAGES AND TRANSPORTATION SNARL-UPS



Getting a PS2 on launch day was one thing – making it home without being mugged was another, according to the press, at least, who were eager to run such stories

30 YEARS OF LAUNCHES

THE WHERE, WHEN, HOW MUCH AND WITH WHAT OF A SELECTION OF KEY MACHINES



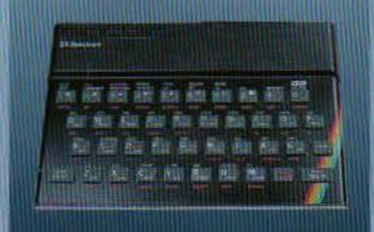
MAGNAVOX ODYSSEY

Where: US When: 1972
How much: $100
Key launch titles: *Cat And Mouse, Hockey, Submarine, Analogic, Football, Tennis, Table Tennis, Haunted House, States, Simon Says*



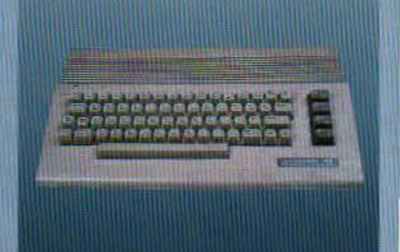
ATARI VCS

Where: US When: 1977
How much: $200
Key launch titles: *Air-Sea Battle, Combat, Blackjack, Indy 500, Star Ship, Street Racer, Surround, Video Olympics*



ZX SPECTRUM

Where: UK When: 1982
How much: £125/£179
Key early titles: *Martian Knockout, Invasion From Jupiter, Labyrinth, Hungry Horace, Planetoids, Adventure One*



COMMODORE 64

Where: US When: 1982
How much: $595
Key early titles: *International Soccer, Adventureland, Fort Apocalypse, Greenhouse, Night Driver, Serpentine*



FAMICOM

Where: Japan **When:** 1983
How much: ¥14,800
Launch titles: *Donkey Kong, Donkey Kong Jr, Popeye*



MASTER SYSTEM

Where: Japan **When:** 1985
How much: ¥15,000
Key early titles: *Hang-On, Transbot, Alex Kidd In Miracle World*



AMIGA

Where: US **When:** 1985
How much: $1,295
Key early titles: *Monkey Business, Mindwalker, Defender Of The Crown, Arena*



ST

Where: USA **When:** 1985
How much: $900
Key early titles: *Sundog: Frozen Legacy, Time Bandit, Brattacus, A Mind Forever Voyaging, Essex, Brimstone, Mindshadow*





one of their parents probably worked for Fairchild in the first place.

Nintendo, typically, was the first launch innovator. Summer 1985, and the Famicom, successfully established in Japan, was preparing to take on the US, a country still reeling from the console collapse of 1983. A tentative approach was called for. Launching only in New York, and working out of a half-flooded warehouse, Nintendo staff bent over backwards in a stealth operation to infiltrate the city's stores. They offered a lucrative agreement, delivering all machines, putting up the displays themselves and even buying back all unsold stock. Nintendo then moved in with a five million dollar marketing budget, and paid major league ball players for signings in malls next to displays of the renamed and redesigned NES machines. It worked in New York, and then LA, Chicago and finally nationwide.

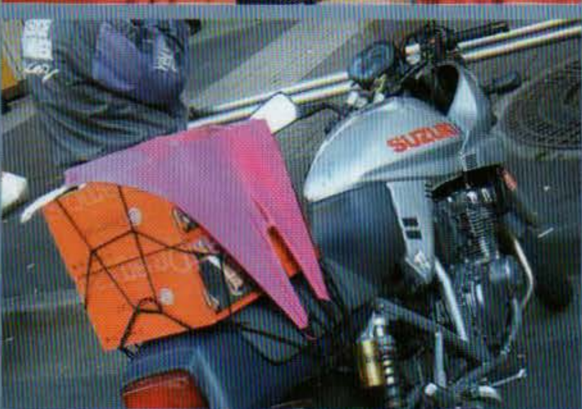
Although it may seem light years away from the all-night queues of the PS2, or the rented aircraft hangar of 360's Zero Hour, the NES launch provided the first sightings of major trends which have persisted to this day: the realisation that different territories require different approaches and the vogue for celebrity endorsement. Both have been major considerations in all subsequent launches.

Sega, whose entry into the market with the Master System fell flat after it was confused with Saga Foods by the technology community, was quick to learn from Nintendo's success, and even added a

The Nintendo 64's launch was a roaring success in Japan, setting high early standards which the console then failed to live up to. Entering a market already dominated by the PlayStation was never going to be easy, even if you had one of the greatest games ever made available on day one







Sega's Yukawa Hidezaku (top) helps distribute the first Dreamcasts in Akihabara. Due to manufacturing trouble, Sega was only able to release 150,000 consoles at launch



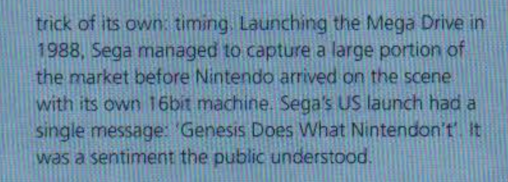


Gamecube's New York launch was just three days after Xbox's in November of 2001, a head-to-head that seems likely to be replicated with the US and Japan launches of PS3 and Wii. At least Nintendo will have Europe to itself





Mario watches on, presumably with bafflement, at Nintendo's curious GameCube launch choices. Oddest of all, perhaps, was Luigi taking the stage for the first time in the software stakes



trick of its own: timing. Launching the Mega Drive in 1988, Sega managed to capture a large portion of the market before Nintendo arrived on the scene with its own 16bit machine. Sega's US launch had a single message: 'Genesis Does What Nintendon't'. It was a sentiment the public understood.

It's an enduring lesson of launches that the 'when' may prove to be far more important than the 'how'. Nintendo's late entry against the Mega Drive cost the company heavily, and the equally late arrival of the N64 was even more damaging. But arriving too early can be as dangerous as pulling up too late and, ironically, it's Sega that may have suffered the most from over-eager launching. Even back before the Dreamcast found itself stranded between hardware generations without its online service ready, the short-lived Saturn arrived prematurely. With a heavily advertised US release planned for 'Saturnday', September 2 1995, Sega decided to launch unexpectedly during E3 on May 11. A masterwork of secret planning, it was a pyrrhic victory at best. If the aims of a launch are to get as big an installed base going as quickly as possible, and to make people 'understand' the machine through weeks of slow-building hype, the Saturn failed on both accounts. With a mere 60,000 consoles suddenly available in stores and no advance warning, the public wasn't prepared. Rather than enter the stadium long after the crowds have started cheering, it was as if they had decided to surprise th audience on their way to the venue by leaping out from behind a tree. Sometimes, however, bad timing is just bad luck. The GameCube's Japanese launch was muted by a close proximity to the September 1 terrorist attacks. As a result, attendance was down, and the machines didn't sell out.

If the Mega Drive had beaten the SNES by proving the timing of a launch was more important than any stunts you pulled during it, Nintendo's machine raised serious questions regarding the validity of hardware releases as a barometer of a console's success. Even though the SNES would struggle to claim 50 per cent of the 16bit market, the launch itself was misleadingly victorious. Despite the fact that the Japanese release (codenamed Operation Midnight Shipping) took place with a certain degree of secrecy due to rumours that the



MEGA DRIVE

Where: Japan **When:** 1988
How much: ¥21,000
Launch titles: *Space Harrier 2, Super Thunder Blade, Altered Beast, Alex Kidd In The Enchanted Castle*



GAME BOY

Where: Japan **When:** 1989
How much: ¥12,800
Launch titles: *Alleyway, Baseball, Super Mario Land*



SUPER FAMICOM

Where: Japan **When:** 1990
How much: ¥25,000
Launch titles: *Super Mario World, F-Zero*



NEO-GEO

Where: Japan **When:** 1990
How much: ¥58,000
Key launch titles: *Cyber Lip, King Of Monsters, Magician Lord, Super Spy, Riding Hero, Joy Joy Kid, Majon Kyo Retsuden*



As celebrity endorsements go, at least Bill Gates and The Rock have a link to games, unlike Andy Warhol. When the Microsoft founder took on the wrestler in combat, the score was 2-1 to Dwayne

competing launches, due to the strength of its brand. This was despite the fact that the PlayStation had much more impressive hardware: such things take a while to become apparent, and launches are a poor means of conveying complex technical insights to the public.

The Saturn, taking its cue from the SNES, helped create another new development that has drastically shaped launches of recent consoles. Almost all the Saturns and SNESes shipped on the first day of their Japanese launch had been preordered in order to avoid queuing. Sadly, stores almost always oversell their preorders, and buyers must still queue anyway.

Preordering problems have already driven at least one person to attempt suicide, but it was also responsible for perhaps the calmest launch in recent history – the Japanese release of the N64. By spreading available machines throughout a large number of different stores, rather than lumping bulk orders together, and enforcing preorder management, Nintendo managed to sell 250,000 machines and an equal number of *Super Mario 64* games on a quiet Sunday morning with no fuss.

Besides queues, another side effect of preordering was that launches could not fail to become media events. The US marketing budget for the N64 was $54 million, meaning that even when the first consignment of 500,000 consoles sold out, each machine bore an advertising cost of over $100. Celebrity, again, plays its role. While the first Dreamcasts were handed out by Sega manager Yukawa Hidezaku wearing a bright orange festival jacket, many companies have looked for more powerful endorsements on the day. Those attending the GameCube launch in New York in 2001 could mingle with a cheerfully eccentric collection of celebrities, including Matthew Modine, John Turturro and Lil' Kim (some of whom admitted that they didn't actually play games). Bill Gates played *Dead Or Alive 3* against The Rock on the night of the Xbox's 2001 US launch. He lost two out of three games, and also suffered a crushing defeat in a round of *Fuzion Frenzy* with a member of the audience. He was back in 2005 to lose several games of *PGR3* on the night of the 360 release, too. Going back further, Commodore had a bemused Andy Warhol on hand to demonstrate the Amiga at launch, and right at the start of the process, Magnavox employed Frank Sinatra to present the Odyssey to the TV audience of one of his Saturday night specials.

WORLD WIDE WARES

The shifting of the PS3 European launch will come as no surprise to many UK gamers, used to receiving consoles anything up to two years after their debuts. Recent releases, however, have taken great pains to treat the three major territories as near-equals. Microsoft in particular has pursued numerous fruitless strategies to endear itself to the Japanese market. The inclusion of *Jet Set Radio Future* in the Xbox's early line-up was intended as a gift to the otaku community – instead, many saw it as holding a cherished IP to ransom. The 360 made huge efforts to learn from previous mistakes, sending numerous JRPGs into production, and designing a smaller console more suited to the Tokyo 'cockpit housing' lifestyle. It didn't work, and the latest machine has, to date, sold even fewer units than the original.

BILL GATES PLAYED DEAD OR ALIVE 3 AGAINST THE ROCK AT XBOX'S 2001 US LAUNCH. HE LOST TWO OUT OF THREE GAMES, AND ALSO SUFFERED A CRUSHING FUZION FRENZY DEFEAT

Yakuza were planning to hijack supply trucks, launch day proved to be one of the iconic moments in gaming history. It's the SNES that gave the world its first sight of queues snaking through the streets of Akihabara, with people camped out to be first in line. Despite all this success, the console walked straight into a strong install base from the Mega Drive, and struggled to dominate the market.

The SNES launch was not alone as a misleading indicator, either. The Dreamcast initially sold very well, despite stock shortages due to problems with chip production which meant its Japanese launch day was limited to 150,000 machines rather than the planned 500,000. Equally, the Saturn fared well against the PlayStation in Japan, during their



Gizmondo's fate was sealed when the only Minogue it could get for the launch party was the one who isn't a national treasure. Within a year, the company was finished, with tales of corporate wrong-doing revealing it was never viable in the first place



3DO

Where: US **When:** 1993
How much: $700
Key launch titles: *Crash 'n' Burn, Escape From Monster Manor*



JAGUAR

Where: US **When:** 1993
How much: $250
All launch titles: *Cybermorph, Raiden, Trevor McFur In The Crescent Galaxy*



PLAYSTATION

Where: Japan **When:** 1994
How much: ¥39,800
Key launch titles: *Ridge Racer, Motortoon Grand Prix, Parodius Deluxe*



SATURN

Where: Japan **When:** 1994
How much: ¥44,800
Key launch titles: *Virtua Fighter, World Soccer, Myst, Tama, Wan Chai Connection*





N64

Where: Japan When: 1996
How much: ¥25,000
Launch titles: *Super Mario 64, Pilot Wings 64, Saikyou Haniu Shogi*



DREAMCAST

Where: Japan When: 1998
How much: ¥29,800
Launch titles: *Virtua Fighter 3TB, Pen Pen Trilcelon, Godzilla Generations, July*



PLAYSTATION 2

Where: Japan When: 2000
How much: ¥39,800
Key launch titles: *Ridge Racer V, Kessen, Fantavision, Eternal Ring, Drum Mania, Stepping Selection*



GAMECUBE

Where: Japan When: 2001
How much: ¥25,000
All launch titles: *Wave Race: Blue Storm, Luigi's Mansion, Super Monkey Ball*

Warhol himself might have approved of the ultimate expression of the celebrity launch, when the Gizmondo made its debut in London in March 2005. Danni Minogue, Tom Green, Sting and Busta Rhymes were all present, but the machine itself made only fleeting appearances then, or indeed in the months that followed.

The main players have long realised that the odd news story outside of the business sections is just as good as John Turturro at attracting attention. The Akihabara suicide bid was one such story, as was a rumour that Saddam Hussein was trying to get his hands on the 'super computer' PS2 – possibly with a launch of his own in mind.

Consoles have grown immensely complex over the years, adding another, more damaging source of launch headlines since it's inevitable that the first machines off the untested production line are often the most buggy. Whether it's the original PlayStations, which had an inferior laser in early models which could easily become misaligned, meaning the machine would only work when placed upside down, or the green screen miseries of many PS2 DVD playbacks, the press are quick to cover tales of early woe.

A picture of excitement: no-one could have predicted that Alfred Molina would one day be the face of PlayStation 3



THE MAIN PLAYERS HAVE LONG REALISED THAT THE ODD NEWS STORY OUTSIDE OF THE BUSINESS SECTIONS IS JUST AS GOOD AS JOHN TURTURRO AT ATTRACTING ATTENTION



Three pictorial promises: Namco's Tekken (above) was the best received of PS2's debut showreels, PS3's unveiling (top right), and PlayStation's first roar (far right)

Getting the consoles to work is just one of the launch headaches for manufacturers. Another is getting enough to market. The maths is almost impossible: it's important that a machine sells out at launch, but equally important to have enough stock ready to ensure that they don't stay sold out for long. The 360, as well as the PSP and DS Lite, all sold so well in their early days that they became hard to find in the weeks that followed. The mania around the PS2 launch saw people flying to Japan to secure machines, or paying up to £1,000 on online auction sites for imports. When no machines are available, disappointed purchasers often turn to rival consoles for comfort.



Early PlayStation owners subjected friends to endless displays of the dinosaur demo, but Sony were just as partial to a T-rex, snapping its real-time jaws for the machine's UK debut in 1994

Of course, software also plays a central role. Too many games, and the market becomes confused. Too few – as in the case of the N64, which launched in Japan with just three titles – and customers lose interest. The right games are crucial: *Super Mario 64* saved the N64 in its early days, and the PS2's lack of



Microsoft's early Xbox TV ads were banned (the ITC received more than 20 complaints over the one which fired a baby, cannon-like, into its own grave), but their print ads (right) just triggered controversy about *what kind* of hair they'd used. Sony's deliberately oblique PS2 ads (above) just triggered debate on what on earth they were supposed to be for



Nobody would ever buy the 'Ultra 64', as it turned out, but the N64's spoiler campaing did little to dent the PlayStation's appeal and more to dent the reputation of Nintendo's marketing department



quality software at launch, whilst boosting the DVD market, seriously dented Sony's reputation with gamers.

All of these elements can affect a launch, and tiny mistakes can have massive repercussions. Can a console really survive a poor debut? The PlayStation 3 can take some comfort from that the fact that its predecessor was dogged, in the run-up to release, by some very familiar headlines. Along with rumours that it was impossible to program for, and questions over its DVD playback and the quality of early software, there were serious worries about console shortages on PS2 release day. E3's word of mouth was pessimistic, and the PlayStation Festival 2000, an event organised to display the machine in the most flattering light, turned out to be an opportunity to watch consoles freeze, crash and spontaneously reset. Even so, there's no question who really won that hardware war. The PS2 was arriving first, on that occasion, bringing with it the excitement of a whole new console generation. The PS3 will not have that luxury.

Sony can also take solace from the fact that, for all their glitz, launches have a very short half-life. The memories fade and blend, leaving nothing more than the image of one long queue, stretching right back to the early '90s. As the weeks pass, nobody remembers who made Times Square turn green, or exactly when Nintendo projected a three-storey Mario onto a skyscraper, or even whether *Luigi's Mansion* outsold *Halo* in its first weeks. All people really recall, once the celebrities have dispersed and the barriers have been dismantled, is going home, plugging in and losing themselves in new worlds.

EMOTIONAL ENGINEERING

The announcement that, as of August, Sony had yet to get the assembly lines running was taken as a sign of doom by some pundits. Microsoft started 360 production in September 2005, significantly further before release than Sony is aiming for, and still failed to produce sufficient machines to satisfy demand. Parts have to arrive at the right time – not so early as to incur storage costs, and not so late they halt production. And the machines still have to get to the shops. At times like this, fate can be particularly cruel, with flooded warehouses and thefts all playing a part. The slimline PS2 spent much of the build-up to Christmas 2004 stuck in the Suez Canal, to loud tabloid delight.



XBOX

Where: US **When:** 2002
How much: $299
Key launch titles: *Halo, Amped, Dead Or Alive 3, Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee, Project Gotham Racing, Rallisport Challenge*



DS

Where: USA **When:** 2004
How much: $150
Key launch titles: *Super Mario 64 DS, Asphalt Urban GT, The Urbz: Sims In The City, Feel The Magic XX/XY, Spider-Man 2*



PSP

Where: Japan **When:** 2004
How much: ¥20,790/¥26,040
Key launch titles: *Ridge Racers, Metal Gear Acid, Everybody's Golf, Lumines, NFSU Rivals, Dynasty Warriors*



360

Where: US **When:** 2005
How much: $299/$399
Key launch titles: *Kameo, Project Gotham Racing 3, Ridge Racer 6, Call Of Duty 2, Condemned, Amped 3, Quake 4, Gun*




BROTHERS
IN ARMS



Co-op gaming has been around for almost as long as gaming, even if its importance has rarely been acknowledged by anyone except gamers. Is a revolution coming?

What if *Pong* had featured just one score at the top of its screen instead of two? Had been a game where players had to paddle the accelerating blip of a ball to one another with the aim of keeping the volley going for as long as possible? Would gaming have become preoccupied with the art of bringing players together as a team instead of as jostling opponents? The question's moot, of course. Not because it would be difficult to forward-engineer such an alternate reality – or how uncomfortably such a change would sit with the game itself – but because gaming has almost always dedicated some of its breadth to co-op gaming, however sidelined an aspect it can sometimes feel.

Co-operative play was a staple of the arcade scene, from its earliest glories through to its recent troubled twilight. Ask any long-serving gamer to reel off their most cherished co-op experiences, and you'll be showered with the standout brands that flourished along with the coin-gulping format, an honour roll that's preoccupied with scrolling beat 'em ups, side-on platforming-puzzlers, 2D shooters and the odd peripheral-led curio: *Gauntlet, Double Dragon, Bubble Bobble, Smash TV, Final Fight, Sunset Riders, Pang, Golden Axe, The House Of The Dead*. The list is as long-winded as the wistful, nostalgic anecdotes they evoke, recollections that invariably are as much about the people involved as the games themselves. But these games lived on in another arena, becoming a prominent fixture of home computer software line-ups, in a co-op structure that has persisted up until recent times – *Lego Star Wars*, for example, or the *Baldur's Gate* and *EverQuest* dungeon crawlers that found their way onto PS2 and Xbox. This framework of same-screen co-op even lent itself to one of the most beautiful and unexpected examples of side-by-side gaming, in Square's SNES RPG *Secret Of Mana*. Its threeplayer mode made minimal use of the console's multitap, but optimum use of a player and two friends, allowing all three to play through its entire length via realtime combat. A similar experience awaited four slightly more patient players in *Tales Of Symphonia* on GameCube, allowing them to come together for the side-on, realtime slash-and-spellcast battles. And the concept has continuously lent its strength to one particular category of game – sports – from *PES* through to a multitude of tennis titles, in which it's a format that's unlikely to die out as time moves on. There's a structural theme discernable in this drop-in format of shared screen space: limited, if any, camera control. Things remain side-on, top-down or isometric; the freedom to ogle and scan the surroundings is constrained, perhaps explaining the paucity of such co-op experiences in modern gaming, with its expectation of user-controlled cameras.

As immediate, jovial and intense as such experiences understandably are, same-screen gaming is the least sophisticated of the co-op canon. A second – or third or fourth – player gets plopped into exactly the same fray, immediately bulking up both manpower and firepower in an often crude manner. A layer of freedom, and complexity, is added by cloning – splitscreen co-op – an act of sharing that increases possibilities but lowers fidelity, a risky trade-off that even the best games aren't guaranteed to weather, forcing each participant to view the game world through a peephole instead of a porthole. Offline splitscreen modes may be close to ubiquitous for console shooters and racers, but they're often realised through custom battle arenas with reduced detail or simpler layouts.



Sometimes, the imagination of players can shape multiplayer gaming outside of the heaving servers of MMORPGs – the 'Cat and Mouse' co-op mode popularised in *Project Gotham Racing 2*, where low-power vehicles were nudged to the finish line by a friend-driven supercar, has became an officially recognised one in *PGR3*

SPLITSCREEN AND SAME-SCREEN **GAMING DRAW ON AN URGE FOR GAMERS** TO GET TOGETHER, AND STAY TOGETHER

But that hasn't stopped any number of games showing a pair of players a full and complete good time: *TimeSplitters* uses clean looks and the brute grunt of the early PS2 to offer a splitscreen co-op slickness next to *Perfect Dark*'s juddery but gadget-rich twoplayer espionage, while *Toejam & Earl* straddles a divide by only splitting the screen once both players head off in opposite directions. A game like *Conflict: Desert Storm* arguably suffers from its valiant effort to provide a splitscreen campaign, with the benefits of fourplayer co-op only just outweighing the loss of expanse and atmosphere. Some negotiate such a rut by being built from the ground-up as co-op experiences, such as DMA's stellar Amiga title, *Hired Guns*, with four-way screen division as standard for however many players. Its success was proved by players' willingness to embrace it despite the setup required to get four participants inputting into an Amiga, let alone huddled comfortably around a monitor. And that's the clinch, of course. Splitscreen and same-screen gaming draw on an urge for gamers to get together, and stay together. The volatile friction of versus modes can bring people together in similar proximity, sure, but deathmatch play runs the risk of lapsing into frustration or dullness with too few players, or with players willing to explore too few tactics. And does online versus play even qualify as social gaming at all, especially given the infamously aggressive and slur-spattered realm of direct confrontation it represents, with its gripping but often coldly obsessive battlegrounds?

By contrast, a failed co-op outing doesn't necessarily lead to a failure of fun – doesn't always feel like defeat. All involved are along for the ride, instead of trying to bring everyone else to a screeching halt. It's a framework that often accommodates colourful emergence, where motives and affiliations can turn on a dime but are less likely to result in anger and sulky silence. It's a timeless part of co-op's appeal, that the lines between, say, the co-ordinated, precision takedown of a group of Legendary-level enemies in *Halo*, and squatting up and down on the corpse of a dead Elite while doing your worst John Wayne impressions, are very thin indeed, allowing players to segue freely into side-splitting stupidity and back again, crafting their own atmosphere to maximise enjoyment.

This is a feeling that's given greatest vitality via the most ambitious and potentially captivating of co-operative formats – multi-screen co-op, enabled via system link or an online connection. It's a chance for people to share not just focused portions of action, but the *whole* game world, albeit with a few limitations. This is where the lion's share of unexplored territory still lies. In theory, there are no barriers – a huge ask for some game worlds, but a feat that's been realised in fits and starts via a handful of fan-favourite Xbox titles and is becoming a regular possibility for Live-enabled 360 owners, allowing a second player to ride shotgun on some increasingly complex solo outings: *Perfect Dark Zero*, *Kameo*, *The Outfit* and, soon, *Crackdown*.

In fact, complex singleplayer games like *Hitman: Blood Money*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Dead Rising*, or even just the astronomic bustle of *Ninety*



With a denounced style but a praised atmosphere, the Xbox conversion of *Doom III* was a technical then-powerhouse that stretched to encompass Live co-op. It was a great application, since it allowed a pair of players to overcome the torch/gun issue that made solo play a cludge of constant inventory cycling



I'LL RUB YOURS

Versus-specific online goals that appear in Xbox 360's Achievements list for certain games cause two problems. First, they're often highly time-dependent, only attainable as long as there are players around to fill up the servers, a population that typically dwindles a few months after release – a frustration for any completists that don't adopt a certain game early enough. Second, online versus gaming already has its notorious fill of campers, bullies, whiners and tricksters without genuinely sporting competitors having to lock horns with the behaviour of Achievement chasers. This has given rise to a new subclass of co-op gamer – Achievement buddies, players hooking up, often via forums, for the specific goal of helping one another earn certain Achievements, by offering focused fast-track play, or simply taking turns to be the willing victim in the pursuit of a required kill count.

THE BEST IN...SAME-SCREEN CO-OP





SECRET OF MANA
(SNES, 1994)

While A Link To The Past lit a fire in the bellies of SNES owners, Square was forging the legend of a different kind of Triforce. The console offered few memorable reasons to dust of its multi-tap; this threeplayer RPG epic was reason enough to put the peripheral under armed protection when not in use.





KURI KURI MIX
(PS2, 2001)

One player, or two, can guide Cookie and Cream through a pair of assault course strips that split the game world, if not the screen, in two, by flicking switches and dodging hazards it's an uncommonly dedicated co-op outing that, for one player, is a uniquely hellish headache, operated as it is using a single pad.





STARSKY AND HUTCH
(PS2, 2003)

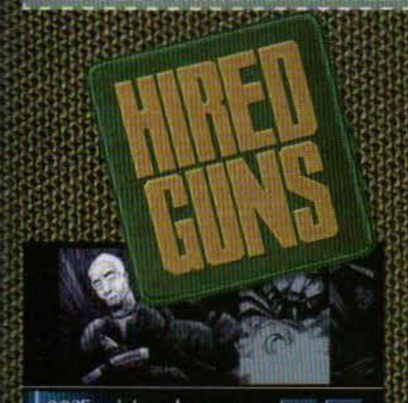
Aping arcade title *Lucky & Wild*, this required a rare and costly setup – a steering wheel and lightgun – but paid off for any wannabe co-op cops that could assemble the necessary parts. While its marriage of shooting and steering was brave, the repetition of its missions meant its dim but lively justice would never be immortalised.



TLOZ: FOUR SWORDS ADVENTURES
(GC, 2005)

Many games know the worth of co-op, but few can realise it as capably as *Four Swords*. Despite demanding a GBA and link-up cable per person, there's no disputing the pedigree of its disputes, as Nintendo flexed its evil streak, orchestrating endless spats, squabbles and scrambles for rupees, in between typically pristine puzzling.

THE BEST IN...SPLITSCREEN CO-OP



HIRED GUNS
(Amiga, 1993)

Quadrupling *Dungeon Master*'s step-by-step perspective of a convincing world, DMA's team-focussed classic still feels sophisticated today. If four characters – chosen from a diverse bank of 12 – didn't offer enough possibilities, mines and sentry guns could cover the angles that guns and grenades couldn't quite lock down.





TOEJAM & EARL
(Mega Drive, 1991)

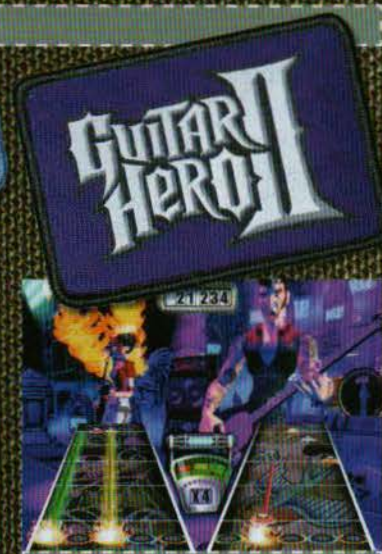
A pair of daft aliens they may be, but a sophisticated and accommodating approach to twoplayer exploration made up its madcap vision of Earth. Accidentally activating a pair of rocket skates that sends both players plummeting over the edge of a level is a breathtaking faux pas, but a few high fives can quickly repair relations.





HALO
(Xbox, 2002)

A poster boy for the potential of co-op play, allowing two players to co-operatively revisit the entirety of its singleplayer scenario. The game's legendary weapon subtlety and frisky vehicles didn't groan under the weight of two Master Chiefs, while the lack of system link or Live co-op in *Halo 2* was positively gutting.



GUITAR HERO II
(PS2, 2006)

Technically not splitscreen, but restricting each player to their own half of it, it epitomises the appeal of co-op next to that of versus competition; the chance to riff back-to-back with another player, instead of head-to-head, is sure to coax even more energetically daft cod-rock-god performances from its players.

THE BEST IN...MULTI-SCREEN CO-OP





PHANTASY STAR ONLINE
(Dreamcast, 2001)

Included here simply because of the hypnotic spell it cast over a number of console gamers, a group who, traditionally, weren't privy to the pros of online collaboration. Focused teamplay and a colourful communication system define a top-tier Dreamcast title whose legacy lives on in the hearts of its former addicts.





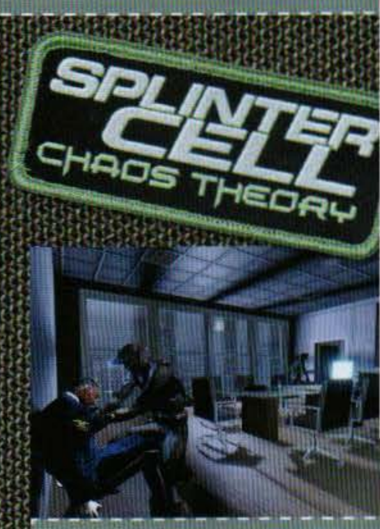
KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER
(360, 2005)

An atypical game that didn't quite realise its potential as action game or adventure, the inclusion of co-op allowed optimal imagination to be applied to its deceptively deep selection of elemental-themed attacks. A 'Power Pack', soon due for download, is set to expand on that appeal with some new co-op modes.



DAIGASSO! BAND BROTHERS
(DS, 2004)

The simplicity is breathtaking – up to eight players, each playing an instrument as part of an orchestra and covering some of Nintendo's greatest hits, all on the back of one cartridge. Even if the rhythm is never found, the action certainly is – just one off-key note in the middle of a Mario medley can bring a whole room to tears.



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY
(Xbox, 2004)

Although the ingenious Mercenary Vs Spy deathmatch template realised in *Pandora Tomorrow* is arguably the more intelligent multiplayer aspect, the chance to explore Sam Fisher's stealth scenarios with another player in tow bodes incredibly well for whatever the forthcoming *Double Agent* has in store.

THE WORST...CO-OP AFTER-THOUGHTS



ICO
(PS2, 2001)

It was never, ever intended to be a part of the experience, but the excitement of discovering the co-operative Easter egg that's tucked away within *Ico* – complete the game, and a second player can control Yorda via a second pad – dissolves away in record time, thanks to the mode being fruitlessly impractical.





SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2
(Mega Drive, 1992)

Tails may have been a sidekick sequel sop, but having the second player control him with a pad made for fittingly haphazard accompaniment while zipping through the stages, if ultimately pointless. The true team-up possibilities due to be explored in the unreleased *Sonic Crackers* would have complemented the idea very nicely.





WE LOVE KATAMARI
(PS2, 2006)

Responsibility for one half of the dual-stick control setup is given to each player. Maintaining momentum through communication is a tiring and short-lived task, next to the vibrancy of solo play: it's the best of intentions and the thorniest of results, a joint effort that didn't so much split responsibilities as just spill them.





GTA: SAN ANDREAS
(PS2, 2004)

Activating certain icons on the map would instigate dedicated *Rampage*-style missions for two. The camera makes brave attempt to keep up, but it's hard to construe this as anything but an extremely raw demonstration of the potential of whatever inevitable online ventures *GTA IV* has up its mysterious sleeve.

The Outfit is one of a number of 360 titles that provides a robust co-op experience, allowing the entirety of the singleplayer campaign to be rattled through with a friend, negating the need for baby-step battlefield strategies and allowing its armoury of player-placed turrets to shine in a manner not permitted by a squad of AI troops



Nine Nights, regularly end up on wishlists for co-op play. Post-coital discussion of a positive singleplayer gaming experience almost always turns to that wistful what-if of co-op possibilities, regardless of how a crowd of two could upset any precariously-tuned gameplay balance. As was suggested in last month's Time Extend on *Guardian Heroes*, the joy is in the joint involvement more than navigating a delicate seesaw of challenge and success. And while more cooks could most certainly spoil the broth, they'll always find ways to turn it into a joyous foodfight.

There's an honorary fourth and somewhat impure dimension to co-op, one that accounts for the wealth of multi-screen play in recent times. It's the place where co-operative and versus gaming collide, and brutally so – team deathmatch. Splicing the sociability of team talk and rich tactics with the unpredictable challenge of human opposition, it's a blend that can become flecked with the same irritations and idiocy that can bog solo competition, but with the backslap and camaraderie of a family – the clan – to help diffuse and soothe it. Team deathmatch is a common and understandable draw – the playful and exciting tennis doubles next to the focused and clinical nature of singles play – but has mostly rested on the laurels of some predictably competitive genres: shooting, driving and MMORPGs. It's multi-screen co-op gaming that's still plump with the greatest potential, from *Kameo*'s mighty morphing monster mash through to the giggly jams and bum notes of a *Daigasso! Band Brothers* session on DS.

Then there's the fact that the definition of co-op play has long been far more fluid than the aforementioned frameworks suggest. Passing the pad, to take turns on a tricky challenge, is co-op play. The sharing of details and strategies via GameFAQs is co-op play. The truly helpful comments of a backseat gamer, or an otherwise disinterested spouse eager to see *Silent Hill*'s story unfold and its puzzles cracked, but not so eager to pinball through the uneven, sluggish combat that joins it all up, is co-op play. The participants of regular LAN parties are another specific – and powerful – kind of co-operative sociability, sparked by a common passion. And where does *Pac-Man Vs* – a game that straddles same, split and multi-screen play – slot into all of this? Ditto the aural jam that can result from two copies of *Electroplankton* being tinkled side by side. Or *Animal Crossing DS*, where you're not so much exploring a person's screen, as the intimacy of their very personality? Indeed, it's only possible to mention a fraction of the specifics of co-op gaming, inevitably omitting some of those titles that individual players hold as definitive. Each co-op experience can launch a thousand unique memories, of particular favourites that know no pattern or fanbase as regularly as singleplayer games. It's a haphazard library of feelings that's only set to expand now that connectivity is a key aspect of commercial gaming, from the online functions and mulit-pad ports of 360, PS3 and Wii, to the wifi capabilities of PSP and DS.

So, are we sat at the tipping point of a co-op revolution? Would it be ridiculous to think that, not too far down the line, the next console from, say,

THE JOY IS IN THE JOINT INVOLVEMENT **MORE THAN NAVIGATING A DELICATE** SEESAW OF CHALLENGE AND SUCCESS



The addition of another player – and hence firearm – is capable of multiplying the fun of duck-and-cover shooter *Miami Vice* on PSP by more than a factor of two, elevating a solid but unspectacular solo outing into something far more tense, energetic and engaging



As well as the typical clutch of deathmatch options, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* found a sustained audience of Xbox Live players thanks to an online mode that facilitated co-op warfare for up to 16 players – a truly emormous quota – who could storm or stalk across custom maps brimming with AI opponents



A divine idea that should have kidnapped the affections of *Secret Of Mana* veterans, *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* hamstrung itself by forcing one player to carry and protect a chalice, leading to a sticky, if ultimately rewarding, pace that just couldn't compete with the mischievous snap and sparkle of *Four Swords*

Microsoft will include a dedicated co-op button, hardwired to allow friends to jump into your game no matter where you are or what you're doing? Perhaps. But near-future releases are already showing that kind of open-minded thinking, from *Crackdown*'s likeable and freely integrated twoplayer option, through to games crafted from the design document up to explore the power of dual perspectives: EA's *Army Of Two* (see 'Two become one') and IO's *Kane & Lynch*. Live functionality, however token, is appearing in nearly every 360 title; is it possible that the real paradigm shift of the forthcoming generation will be those seemingly innocuous co-op modes, tucked away within a suite of multiplayer options but capabale of capturing the attentions of gamers on a tremendous scale? It's certainly plausible.

Less dramatically, if co-op ideas become standard instead of prosthetic, then it could usher in a new era of fresh ideas, of captivating communication and other such non-aggressive facets whose absence is blamed for gaming's lack of appeal to non-gamers. With console manufacturers and publishers alike agreeing that the form needs to reach out to a new audience instead of just reaching deeper into the current cult of the converted, co-operative play is perhaps the most efficient way forward, able to raid established genres and mechanics with relative ease and with revitalised results. In the end, co-op gaming isn't so much home to genres of game as genres of player, a variety that can spin the experience every time they find someone willing to join in. The designers let players join the dots; co-op lets them colour in the picture however they like.

Co-operation is an organic part of gaming, a social *and* inclusive way to play that can shine through the crummiest of game designs. Even if it never breaks free from its secondary status, and no matter how many power-fantasy clichés gaming as a whole continues to hide behind, or how much damage it takes from continued potshots from moral naysayers, co-op gaming has shown how rich human games can be, have been, and will very likely continue to be.

TWO BECOME ONE

Just how important is it that a publisher as large as EA has taken enough of an interest in co-operative play to weave an entirely new franchise – *Army Of Two* – around the unproven success of such a format? If co-op is indeed a fundamental part of gaming's future, then there are few others as well positioned to raise awareness of its potential. Despite its stand-out status, *Army Of Two* nestles quite comfortably in EA's portfolio – it's a home-grown project, and the urge to succeed in bringing co-op to a serious number of players courses through it; its committment to the power of partnering is nothing less than absolute, from the title itself through to the most incidental of details. We talked to **Reid Schneider** (above left), senior producer, about raising a game to the power of two.



Why did you choose to create a game centred on co-op?
All of us were big fans of co-op games, but we also felt that these experiences were usually just add-ons to existing games. Nobody had really focused on co-op play, in shooter-type games, from the ground up.

Was there any nervousness from within EA about producing something so geared towards a co-op experience?
Co-op has been way under-utilised by the gaming industry. We wanted to build a game from the ground up that delivered a killer two-man gameplay experience and really innovated. There hasn't been a new strategic and tactical way to play a shooter in a long time – our goal is to innovate and offer a killer gameplay experience.

MANY PEOPLE FELT THAT FIRSTPERSON **SHOOTER GAMES WERE STRICTLY PC** EXPERIENCES UNTIL HALO CAME OUT

Has this long been a wish of yours – or of your team, also – to create a co-op experience? Or did it just seem that the time was right?
We think players are just waiting for the right game to give them the experience. Many people felt that firstperson shooter games were strictly PC experiences until *Halo* came out. It's our job to change how they feel about co-op tactical.

Are there any particular co-op games you used as inspiration for *Army Of Two*, or any that you've loved over the years and motivated you?
I think all of us were fans of *Contra* back in the day, and *Double Dragon* was huge as well. We also really really enjoyed the co-op experience in *Halo*.

How much easier is it to produce a co-op led game on next-gen platforms, compared to the console formats of the current generation?
Army Of Two is a game we have been wanting to build for a long time. The latest crop of hardware is helping us do it – it would not have been possible on the last generation of hardware.



Back-to-back fighting is a staple co-op manoeuvre – your AI partner can be ordered to take up a position so that rear weakspots on your armour are covered



Is there any specific reason why *Army Of Two* isn't currently scheduled for PC? Do you think PC gamers are less likely to be accepting of co-op experiences than console gamers?
Right now we're just focusing on the console gamer. I definitely believe *Army Of Two* could be successful on PC. It really comes down to focus, when we're creating a console game its not a moving target, with PC it can be.

How important a part of the next-gen scene do you think co-op gaming is going to be? Do you think it has the potential to eclipse deathmatch gaming in terms of popularity and appeal?
We're huge believers in co-op gaming. We don't necessarily believe it will overtake deathmatch, but at the same time we think people want new experiences. It also comes down to play style, there will always be gamers who just want to kill each other and not co-operate to succeed. That being said, when you play a co-op game and co-operate with a friend, it can be really rewarding as a play experience.

Part of the traditional appeal of co-op games such as *Halo* has been that the players are 'equal' and are free to co-operate as they please – do you think there's a risk of restricting that kind of choice when creating a game with dedicated co-op goals in mind? Do you think there's a danger of one player being lumped with the 'boring' side of the teamwork role?
For us PAI [partner AI] is not just about following orders or executing commands; like a squad-based game. We obviously need to have these features, but we also need to go way beyond that and create a partner AI that has attitude, emotion, and a state of mind.

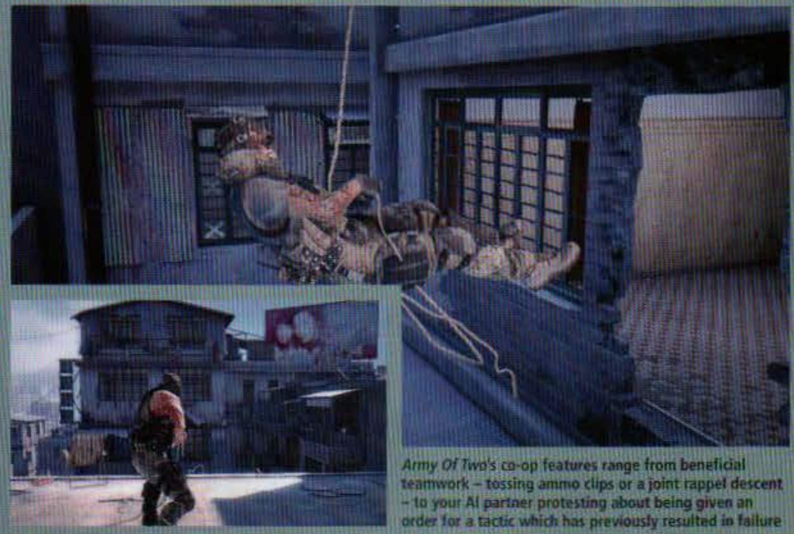
Recently we were doing tests where the PAI did simple actions like slapping your



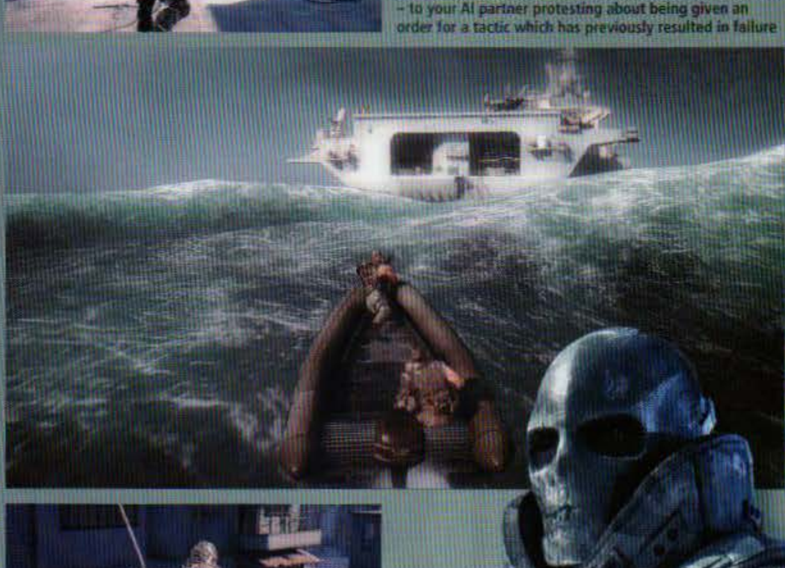
hand when you got close to him similar to a sports team or group of guys hanging out. It really created the feeling that there was a person inside the armour. We're focusing on these subtleties because this is what really makes you believe its real. Thus we're working on the PAI on both the macro scale of military tactics and the micro scale of those kinds of subtleties.

A lot of what's been revealed about *Army Of Two* so far has been some epic set-pieces; will the game feature more traditional sections that allow players to simply mould their own tactics around more flexible and freeform firefights?
Definitely. We have focused on showing some cool set-pieces early on, but the majority of the game is going to be focused on tactics. That being said, one of our primary goals is for each level to have a huge ending. We want to reward players.

What have been the trickiest challenges you've need to overcome in realising *Army Of Two*?
Our biggest challenge is figuring out how to make the AI behave reasonably in positive and negative situations. For example, in sports games you know that sometimes your AI team-mates will make errors and not play perfectly, however for shooter-type games we have not yet reached that level of sophistication where the PAI plays well but



Army Of Two's co-op features range from beneficial teamwork – tossing ammo clips or a joint rappel descent – to your AI partner protesting about being given an order for a tactic which has previously resulted in failure





then may screw-up once in a while. We need to find the right balance of making the PAI successful, but not perfectly successful so you can just sit back and let him play the game.

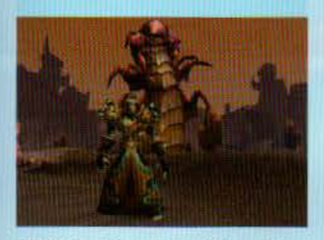
How have Xbox 360 and PS3 performed, with regards to realising the networking aspects of *Army Of Two*? And how have you coped with the issue of latency?
We actually dropped the client-server architecture and have gone with a lock-step approach to the network. This basically means that inputs are replicated across a network. The main reason for this is that we have a game where the characters are often working together and the animations need to sync up perfectly. We are also heavily physics driven which again works better for a lock-step simulation.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

World Of Warcraft



All it takes is a phonecall to pull you back, all those 'not-until-Burning-Crusade' good intentions obliterated in an evening of instinctive martial harmony
PC, VIVENDI

Dead Rising



Will it ever stop? Shortcuts cough up new clothes, previously unseen weapons seem to drop from the sky, and every inventive botch of story mode brings another ending
360, MICROSOFT

Test Drive Unlimited



Tearing up a coastal highway on a precariously-balanced Kawasaki Ninja with the Pacific sun glare in our eyes and a custom soundtrack in our ears – yes, *this* is *Test Drive*
360, ATARI

Hurt me plenty
Can we get some suffering over here?



With its us-or-them premise and welcoming action hero roles, *Gears Of War* is unlikely to deliver moral challenges. Its raging environment, however, could still provide an emotional test by bludgeoning players into near-submission

Let's take a moment aside to talk about some truly awful videogames; get back in the crypt *Kabuki Warriors*, this isn't about you. With gaming so densely populated by the cynical and unambitious, it's easy to forget that a word like 'awful' can mean something other than 'exquisitely bad', and in this case often should. The last month has seen *Company Of Heroes* and *Defcon* remind us what games can be, yet seldom are: real emotional challenges.

Interestingly, these two games about the horrors of war approach their subject from polar ends of the spectrum. *Heroes* wants you to be the commanding soldier, face down in mud, tinnitus-stricken, stumbling as the world around you explodes, and swallowing hard as your men explode with it. *Defcon*, however, is more detached. More so, in fact, than any commercial wargame yet, abstract to the point where you're not even the bunker general, but the uncaring computer in the room behind them. Yet despite their differing methods, both games take you to the same unfamiliar place, where the message on the screen isn't: "You got the bastards! Thanks for playing!"

Like books and movies before them, games are losing their fear of leaving players in conflict, their feelings unresolved. Moreover, they're willing to toughen progress on ever more personal levels. Those who were shellshocked by *Call Of Duty 2*, suffocated by *San Andreas*' Los Santos, frozen by *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi 2* or shamed by *Shadow Of The Colossus* will attest to that, and vouch for it. In gaming's great quest for maturity, this is the all-important step.

So where can others go that wish to follow? What can other games do to make players *almost* not want to play them? As ever, the answers are all around, in the stories that we hear and the world in which they're told. Take the weather, for instance. Why do we always cheer a rainstorm in a game when really we should be willing it to stop? Why must the burning sun be a thing of constant beauty but never energy-sapping malice? And the old favourite: why should we be cheering when we kill?

Now that we're used to being flattered and rewarded, angered and frustrated, maybe pain and doubt should be the next frontiers. Imagine that, a game in which the code doesn't break, but the player just might.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



JUST CAUSE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) PC, PS2, XBOX PRICE: £40 (360) £30 (OTHERS) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: AVALANCHE PREVIOUSLY IN: E153, E164, E167





Though large and undeniably beautiful, you can't help but feel the developers bit off more than they could chew. It would have benefited from a smaller island and a greater concentration of more imaginative challenges and features

The opening freefall, an exhilarating drop and graceful glide down to a beachhead, lays bare the jewel in *Just Cause*'s crown – an idyllic island paradise, pregnant with possibilities.

Over a thousand square miles of mountainous jungle terrain, golden coastline and rolling clouds stretch out before you, the subtle, ever-changing sunlight washing the ocean in colour and presenting the island anew with each passing hour. There's a delicate beauty here that eclipses even Azeroth and Tamriel's finest vistas. It's an impressive technical and aesthetic achievement – but with such a grand stage set, the ever-present worry is that there won't be a performance worthy enough to fill it.

It's founded – to a degree. The point-to-point mission structure – instigated by three different factions on the island of San Esperito – is painfully overfamiliar. Compulsory Agency missions, which further the story of regime change on the island, are initiated by travelling to markers on the main map before following a second to your objective. Likewise, secondary Guerilla and Rioja Cartel missions can also be taken on – earning points which improve relationships with each, unlocking safehouses (zones which nullify your wanted level) as well as giving access to more powerful weaponry and easier access to more useful vehicles.



Like some wayward errand boy, who'll have his fun between demanding masters, Rico has a boundless capacity for mischief



So much as scraping the paintwork of a civilian vehicle is enough to attract unwanted attention from the nervous police force, and it's problem that can escalate all too quickly – making simple travel unnecessarily violent. It doesn't take long for you to start avoiding road journeys at all costs if possible



Right: There are a handful of cities dotted around the island, which while providing respite from the jungle are devoid of any real charisma, and are rarely used in any meaningful way

While the main missions prove relatively engaging – asking you to assassinate, obliterate key targets, give chase to corrupt government officials or steal and deliver items – the seemingly endless repetition of secondary objectives soon grates. Liberation of towns, retrieval of items and vehicles and search-and-destroy jaunts around the jungle make up the bulk of *Just Cause*'s missions and demonstrate a disappointing lack of imagination. Given the range of Rico's abilities, the scope of the environment and the sheer range of vehicles on offer it smacks of an opportunity wasted. It's frustrating, because despite the rather lacklustre tasks on offer, *Just Cause* has a number of unique elements, which, on the occasion that they combine, give it a strong underlying appeal.

Like some wayward errand boy, who'll have his fun between demanding masters, Rico has a boundless capacity for mischief. Minor skirmishes between cartels, rocket fire from a stolen military vehicle, the suicidal tendencies of the local police force and the unpredictability of the varied terrain allow for spectacular action sequences to emerge from nowhere – unscripted and impossible to replicate – with another, more audacious, always around the corner.

Leaping from vehicle to vehicle, jettisoning yourself from the burning wreckage of a plane and shaking off gunfire



as though it were confetti is laughably unrealistic, certainly – but these are the rules according to Avalanche. Accepting *Just Cause*'s somewhat elastic laws of physics, exploiting them and learning to use them to your advantage is delightfully empowering – evoking memories of playing with toy soldiers as a child.

As simple as it was to stage a leap from the arm of a sofa to the top of the stairs in a single bound, so too can Rico conquer the impossible – launching himself from the roof of a car to an attacking helicopter as though snatched through the air by the invisible hand of an impatient toddler. Rico's abilities, then, are as much a god-send for traversing huge distances with ease as they are for turning the tables on his enemies – and go some way to alleviating the tedium of travel across the vast island.







Perhaps the most cynical of all the side missions comes in the form of a *GTA*-style item 'hunt' (they're actually marked on the main map) – which means a tawdry afternoon spent in a stolen helicopter for little reward



Air travel is a highlight, allowing the player to fully appreciate San Esperito's load-free environment. There's a different backdrop to each mission depending on when it's tackled





Civilians scattering like startled rats and government forces charging down your bullets with a suicidal approach to their own safety might not make for particularly intelligent combat, and it's a problem confounded by infinitely respawning enemies. More often than not, despite the weapons at your disposal, it's often more efficient to simply run and hope

However, such versatility to his actions brings its own problems. Buoyed by simple – though slightly loose – controls, a generous automatic weapon lock and solid vehicle handling, Rico is an effective one-man army who's difficult to counter. As a result the game's handling of difficulty shows shades of desperation. Rather than increasing challenge through intelligent design, Avalanche has adopted the kitchen sink approach. Reminiscent of *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, later missions are accompanied by a never-ending hailstorm of missile fire – with players being forced to survive more, for longer and across farther distances.

It's obviously been a difficult balancing act, but unlike *Hulk Just Cause* narrowly avoids falling into frustration by virtue of the sheer range of options available to you should you wish to escape. And returning healthier and significantly more dangerous, or even emerging victorious through your own seat-of-the-pants ingenuity, proves immensely satisfying.

It's this constant see-sawing of quality which proves the greatest bugbear – with every triumph providing stark contrast to *Just Cause*'s more mediocre elements. And they *are* mediocre – not broken, not damning, simply at odds with the game's more impressive achievements. Awkward character animation in a stunning game world, dull and often clumsy missions sitting ill at ease with the tools provided to complete them and an arsenal that stubbornly refuses to make any lasting impact on Rico's world.

For all its quirks, the overriding impression of *Just Cause* is favourable. There's an almost childish enthusiasm at work here – and an unparalleled sense of freedom that can be enjoyed just as easily as it can be criticised. In the face of Avalanche's many accomplishments, it would be downright rude not to revel in them. **[7]**

Whatever a spider can



The most important components of *Just Cause* are the use of freefall (initiated by jumping from any suitable height) the grapple gun, which allows you to tether yourself to vehicles, and the parachute, which allows you to glide gracefully over obstacles. However, it's the 'Stunt' feature which proves the most useful – allowing Rico to hop from the roof of one vehicle to another, or freefall directly into the cockpit of a low-flying vehicle. There's also a certain convenience to his abilities – allowing you to cross terrain that other games may require you to tediously circumnavigate. Not since Treyarch injected Spider-Man's web-fluid with physics has control of a hero felt so liberating.



BROKEN SWORD: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: REVOLUTION/SUMO DIGITAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E162, E167

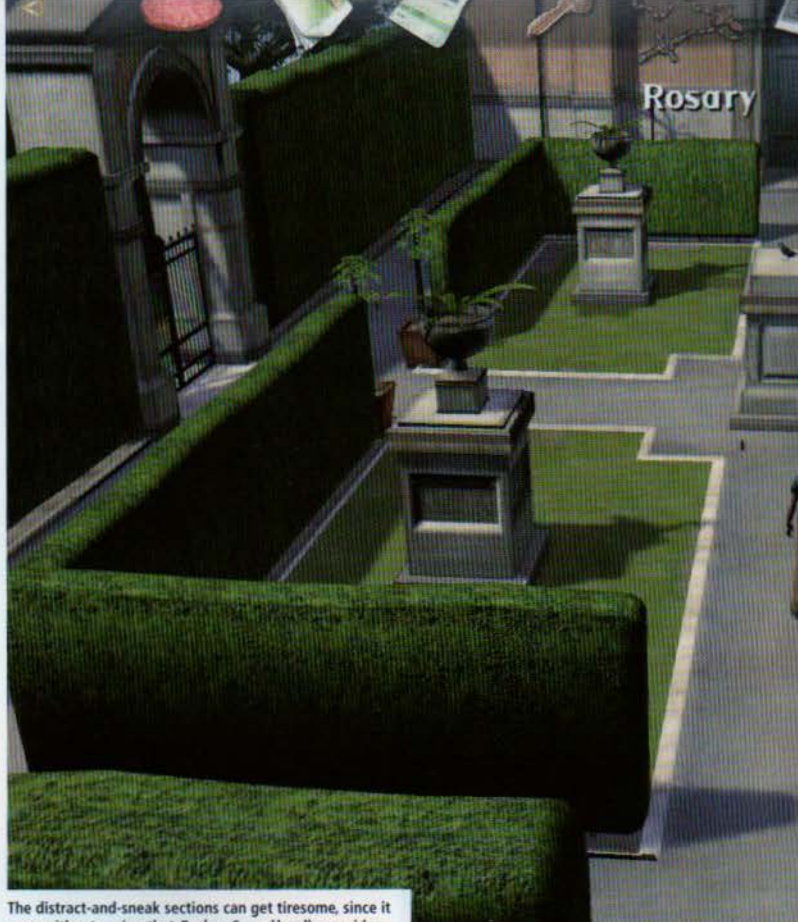




Highlights of the game's art design are its superb icons. Their meaning – be it verb, noun or conversational topic – is always crystal clear. The pristine, uncluttered display is also a delight

Charles Cecil did not expect there to be another George Stobbart adventure, and it seems neither did George Stobbart, as the former patent lawyer, treasure hunter and amateur medievalist is taken unawares by the new plotline while making a meagre living as a Brooklyn bail bondsman. George's initial reluctance to get involved in a new escapade is easily swept aside by a mysterious blonde's pleas for help – just as, one suspects, Cecil's was by the entreaties of adventure game aficionados to make it. With no trilogy to complete, and with *The Sleeping Dragon*'s crusade to bring the adventure game to new players quietly abandoned, those entreaties remain *The Angel of Death*'s only real reason for existence, and it shows. There's no genre anxiety here, no *Fahrenheit*-style ambition to rewrite the rules, just some old-fashioned point-and-click puzzling in the company of old friends. It's pure encore – this one's for the fans, thank you and goodnight.

In some ways, it's done *Broken Sword* a lot of good. Although there is an option to control George directly – fairly rudimentary it must be said, and poorly suited to the game's fixed camera style – the return to mouse and pointer has resulted in an interface design of refined elegance and economy. Context-sensitive actions are executed with a left click, alternatives (usually only one or two) brought up with a right click, inventory items dragged from a disappearing bar at the top of the screen and applied to objects or offered to people with intuitive ease. George's movement is only a partial success, though. He can be directed with a simple click or steered with they keyboard, giving just enough flexibility to cope with 3D environments and camera pans, but in some situations not quite enough precision. Erratic pathfinding and a tendency to snag on furniture are irritating in the many sections where some speed and stealth are necessary, and mildly disturbing to the game's otherwise serene air.



The distract-and-sneak sections can get tiresome, since it goes without saying that *Broken Sword* hardly provides the precise control and consistent rules for guards of a *Metal Gear*. The generous checkpoints ease the pain

For all that this is a fresh start for George, *The Angel Of Death* takes place in an extremely familiar milieu from the moment the mysterious (and it must be said, rather vapid and characterless) Anna Maria turns up in George's office with cartoonish Mafio on her tail, talking of an ancient family manuscript and the treasure it must lead to. The ensuing plot is a lightweight scamper through all the expected low comedy, high art, international intrigue, historic tourist hotspots (Rome! Istanbul!), colourful bit-players, Templar conspiracies and mild peril. It's somewhat perfunctory, a framework for string of archetypal *Broken Sword* situation rather than a compelling or cohesive story i its own right. However, Cecil's confidence, experience and light touch with this materi makes it feel quite natural. The humour is occasionally clumsily gauche, but sometime has an unexpectedly sharp cheek – rather li George's own combination of deviousness and naivety and, like him, is ultimately likeable. Cheap, jarring animations don't help the narrative flow, but Anna Maria, and George's inexplicable infatuation with her, is the biggest problem. She's a vacuum at the game's heart that would threaten to undermine it were it not for a predictable but welcome twist that makes her the MacGuffin, and reintroduces our unrequite love and George's verbal sparring partner, French photojournalist Nico, in her place.

As it is with the plot, so it is with the puzzles; confidence in the fans' desire for old-school adventure comfort-gaming is justified, but the execution betrays a little





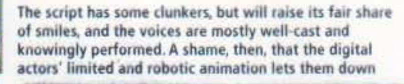
While locations can seem lifeless – a sign of their static artwork heritage – their design is attractive and atmospheric







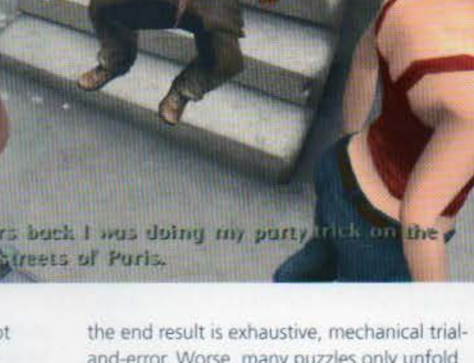




The script has some clunkers, but will raise its fair share of smiles, and the voices are mostly well-cast and knowingly performed. A shame, then, that the digital actors' limited and robotic animation lets them down









Manuscripts walk the line between authenticity and the need for clues and riddles. Linking clue to puzzle is easy enough, but spotting patterns is where the challenge lies

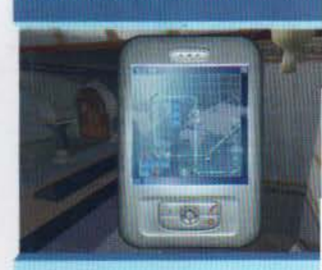
sleepwalking complacence. We might not necessarily want inventory puzzles to be replaced forever with freeform dialogue trees and emotional method-gaming, but that's not to say some of the old kinks in logic and process shouldn't be ironed out. Time and again in *The Angel Of Death*, a perfectly obvious solution to a problem is ignored in favour of an absurdly contrived one, and whenever a puzzle hinges on the responses of NPCs – which is very often, considering the misdirection and distraction that are George's stock-in-trade – these prove bizarre and unpredictable. Obfuscation, lateral thinking and a soupçon of gleeful surrealism are all part of the adventure author's art, to be sure, but Cecil can get lost in them, and the end result is exhaustive, mechanical trial-and-error. Worse, many puzzles only unfold properly if a strict sequence of actions and conversational gambits is obeyed, meaning the right solution is tried and discounted when it was merely too early.

The Angel Of Death's saving grace is a different style of puzzle, one that requires observational skills, research and cold, hard intellect. Riddles in ancient rather than modern settings eschew conversation and inventory in favour of mechanical and symbolic systems that require careful study of clues embedded in manuscripts, and in the historical database stored on George's PDA, to decode. These are mostly rock-solid in their logic and highly satisfying (as are the occasional hacking minigames) because you know you're entirely relying on your own wits, rather than trying to second-guess the author's. If only they could have comprised more of the total length of the game.

Confidence in the fans' desire for old-school adventure comfort-gaming is justified, but the execution betrays a little complacence

The Angel Of Death is an unapologetic throwback, and to some extent rightly so; the attempts to reinvent the adventure game since it fell out of favour have threatened to erase what it was in the first place, and in that context an assured statement of classic values like this comes as something of a relief. But when you don't reinvent, you have to refine, and it's only in the slick pointing and clicking itself that Cecil and Sumo have really managed that. The rest now looks like a rather strange agglomeration of tics and tropes, a smooth narrative surface hiding a wayward string of consequences that you will have to stumble as well as think your way through. It's hard to dislike such an educated and relaxed distraction, but sadly easy to discard it. **[6]**

Hack and backslash



George's PDA stores notes on relevant history as well as progress to date, and can be used to make phone calls – a useful diversionary tactic when you can find the right number. But its most entertaining use is a hacking application that gains you access to nearby computer networks if you solve a grid puzzle, bouncing a data stream around various nodes using mirrors and splitters en route to the destination server. It's reminiscent of Vortex's great 1987 laser puzzler, *Deflektor*, and its strictly graphical as opposed to conceptual conundrums make for a pleasant change of pace.



COMPANY OF HEROES

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 29
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: RELIC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E167

War effort



In *Company Of Heroes*, resources are exchanged for territory. Infantry and, given the right upgrades, light armour can capture flagpoles within a sector of the map – each of which can grant manpower, fuel or munitions. These supplies only trickle into your piles if they're connected to the rest of your territory, or 'in-supply'. Smart players will use this to cut their opponents off at vital moments.

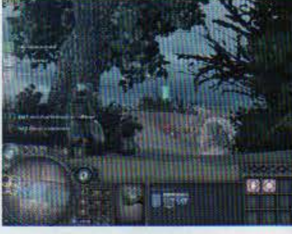
There's a sense of prejudice against *Company Of Heroes* from the off. First off, it's an RTS, that most staid of genres. Second, it's an RTS set in the Second World War. "WW2 is a genre in and of itself," said one studio head recently. "A genre we tire of," replied the world. War weariness isn't limited to those who watch the TV news.

Stave off that shellshock. *Company Of Heroes* is a truly excellent game. It is tightly balanced, technologically impressive, rarely dull and constantly challenging. For RTS veterans it has a precision of play, fluidity of battle and refinement of pacing that still seems to outwit the vast bulk of other, notionally similar games. For newcomers, the sheer visceral intensity – ground-shaking, earth-scattering explosions and an approach to ragdoll physics which brings a whole new meaning to the phrase 'infantry detachment' – bridges the gap between involvement and engagement which alienates many from the genre. In fact, dismiss any concerns you may have over the well-trod setting. The only prejudice you could hold against *Company Of Heroes* is the thin side selection – Russia and Japan presumably waiting off-map, to be called in for the inevitable expansion packs.



The violence of an artillery barrage in *Company Of Heroes* cannot be overstated. Shells devastate buildings, the landscape and even entire armies





Frontal attacks on fortified positions and tanks are folly: rounds simply bounce off their forward armour. Flank attacks are far more successful, creating a balletic engagement



First impressions are formed by technology. Infantry sprint for cover, holding their helmets, ducking behind walls. Artillery sprays dirt and smoke, pin-wheeling men caught in the blast up into the sky. Roofs crackle and splinter, creating holes through which snipers can peer. Take the battle for Carentan: after a short invasion, Allied paratroopers have pressed the Axis beyond the three bridges that connect the north of the town to the south – a victory that's set to be short-lived. In ten minutes, there will be a full counter-attack, supported by Panzer tanks, for which the player must prepare by mining the bridges, preparing sandbags to hide behind and putting up tank traps. Machine gun platoons are positioned at forward-facing windows, and mortars hide behind buildings to provide indirect fire. When the attack comes, it delivers in both its scale and violence: covered with dust and wreckage, the front lines of what used to be a town are little more than rubble.

In certain missions, the player is presented with what appears to be a woefully inadequate force. Succeeding against such overwhelming numbers is a rare thrill. A flamethrower (main picture) is handy in this situation

A second impression of this melee is that there's detailed opportunity for tactical decision-making. The machine guns and mortar teams so vital for cutting down infantry need to be given a direction and arc of fire: if they're flanked, they're dead. The same is true of the armour and anti-armour weaponry – a round will bounce off a Tiger's front armour, but put a hole in its side. Better still, a direct hit might kill the gunner in the turret, or damage the tracks.

Lasting impressions, though, are simply of the depth and balance of *Company Of Heroes*' strategy. There might only be one singleplayer campaign, told from the US point of view, but it's long, violent and exhausting – as the setting demands. It may produce an experience which is as gruelling as it is compelling, but that's a badge of honour the game wears with pride **[9]**





Pistol-whipping hostages will force the police to lay down their weapons and face the wall, tempting you to execute the helpless officials at point blank range. It's very hard to resist



RESERVOIR DOGS

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: VOLATILE GAMES

Quentin Tarantino's debut movie was a tense, taut and lean exercise in visceral cinematic minimalism. Harnessing a new wave-inspired non-linear narrative, Tarantino pieced together an elegiac action film in which most of the action had to be filled in by the audience themselves. It was smart, arrogant and affecting. So the fact that Reservoir Dogs has come to share its name with this pitiful shooter feels like a betrayal. If developing it was supposed to prove that interactive media reduces emotionally-charged drama to the realms of the purely disposable, this triumphantly succeeds.

Underpinning the game is the idea that it will explain the outcome of narratives the film set up but never resolved. It does nothing of the kind, content instead to invent tenuous situations derived from throwaway lines in the movie. Players move through all principal colour-coded characters at least once, learning precisely nothing about any of them in the process.

Essentially two continuously repeating levels disguised as a game, *Reservoir Dogs* contains all of three gameplay devices: tactical negotiation, shooting people and getaway driving. Grindingly stretched over 14 incredibly similar 'chapters', that really is it.

The tactical elements are actually quite clever – grabbing hostages will bait the police into cowering submission – but it soon transpires that this is the game's one good idea. It's a concept it's more than happy to stick with right to the bitter end, despite exposing itself as a ploddingly weary necessity very early on. Shoot-outs are also unbearably slow and repeat so often that you soon tire of blowing yet another cop's head off. This weakness in momentum could easily have been rectified by the inclusion of fast *Time Crisis*-like segments, providing the pace and immediacy a thirdperson shooter needs to win out. *Reservoir Dogs*, however, is far more concerned with blood-splattered cheap thrills than providing an enjoyable gaming experience.

Remedial in both design and play, the driving stages feature ridiculously bouncy physics that make vehicles seem so light as to be inflatable. All objectives are entirely cavalier, feeling more like bonuses than fully-fledged missions (escape the cops, kill the cops, escape the cops again – a pattern emerges early on). A *GTA*-style map is inexplicably included, superfluous since there's only ever one way to go.

It is, as you've probably heard, incredibly violent. Playable acts include burning out a victim's eyes with a lit cigar, cutting off fingers, pistol whipping characters to death and, naturally, the infamous ear slicing. And, in all truth, these moments are the most satisfying provided. But by the time you've got through the first few levels it's difficult to care, as you become desensitised by boredom rather than bloodiness.

Ultimately, *Reservoir Dogs* provides abundant ammunition for those who hate videogames. Not because of its lackadaisical, nonsensical attitude to violence or cruelty, but because it comes close to confirming the prejudice anti-gaming advocates continually mount against our hobby: wading through it makes you think you're wasting your time. **[3]**





Performing high-risk tasks will unlock Bullet Festival mode. Action is slowed down Hong Kong-style, allowing you to take aim at any number of targets. The result is played back in glorious detail, as this cop decapitation (right) shows

Cutscenes are let down by their rendering, reminiscent of the PSOne era. Mr Orange is particularly badly afflicted – a hideous amalgamation of Mick Hucknall and Plasticine



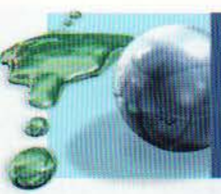


While the ethos of the movie proved that less can be more, the game takes entirely the opposite view. Excess pervades every aspect, from the unreal driving to terrorising victims

Pulp diction



At some points driving looks more like The Dukes Of Hazzard than Reservoir Dogs. But it's not only excessive stunts and jumps that jar so sharply with the source material. In-car banter attempts to imitate the wise-cracking, riff-heavy scripting of the movie. Gangster cliché after gangster cliché is unleashed, showing none of the pop-cultural flair of Tarantino's trademark dialogue. It's a real shame because *Reservoir Dogs* would have provided the perfect framework for taking writing in videogames forward in a very high profile way.



MERCURY MELTDOWN

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 29
PUBLISHER: IGNITION DEVELOPER: AWESOME STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E165

A cube with seven faces



NPCs are a rather disconcerting new feature, though cubed humanoids Stan and Huebrick prove themselves to be as functionally integral as any other gameplay element. Enemies have also been introduced: the demonic Mercoids will try to devour as much of your blob as possible if you can't manage to avoid them. Initial scepticism soon turns to engagement as the realisation dawns that they're vital to level completion. A lot of time and effort has gone into creating characters as appealing and enduring as possible, even if they do come off as slightly cutesy. Luckily, the same fate has not befallen the mercury itself, though the temptation to anthropomorphise the silver blob must have loomed large during development.

Mercury Meltdown is every bit the attention-seeking sibling of *Archer MacLean's Mercury*. Overhauling its predecessor's 'best-in-show' visual ethos, *Meltdown* is not so much an evolved sequel as a complete renovation. Gone are the clean, clinical lines of the original game, replaced instead with loud, funky cel-shaded graphics. A bright, breezy interface invites players of all ages and abilities to the party – this is no longer the exclusive territory of the puzzle-game elite. And while it's true that by screaming out for a wider audience concessions have been made to design and playability, fans need not fret. *Mercury Meltdown* retains enough of its older relative's flair and challenge to satiate even the most ardent MacLean-iac.

Substantially, the mercury itself is a delight. Completely (and stunningly) malleable and divisible, you'll need to tentatively guide it through various obstacle courses with the analogue nub. Confounding your journey to completion are various devices: pressure switches, transporters, conveyor-belts, sticky walls, ray guns and heaters. Veering off ledges or encountering various anti-mercury machines will subtract from your overall mercury count, of which it's necessary to have at least 50 per cent in order to progress. Landscapes will tilt and turn in order to delay you and more often than not you'll have to mix colours in order to finish.

'Mechanism' is an overused term in videogame appraisal these days, but *Meltdown* is, in essence, pure mechanics. Elemental in every sense, each component and contraption interplays perfectly and precisely with the delicately surrounding environments. Physics are a smooth blend of gravitational trickery and mathematical infallibility and are always inextricably linked to the gameplay itself. This is where the true genius of the game lies – it's not only movement and motion you have to pay attention to, but mass and matter as well. You're not just in physical control of this poisonous glob, you're physically responsible for it. Although emotional attachment to a metal blob sounds unlikely, you can't help feeling protective.

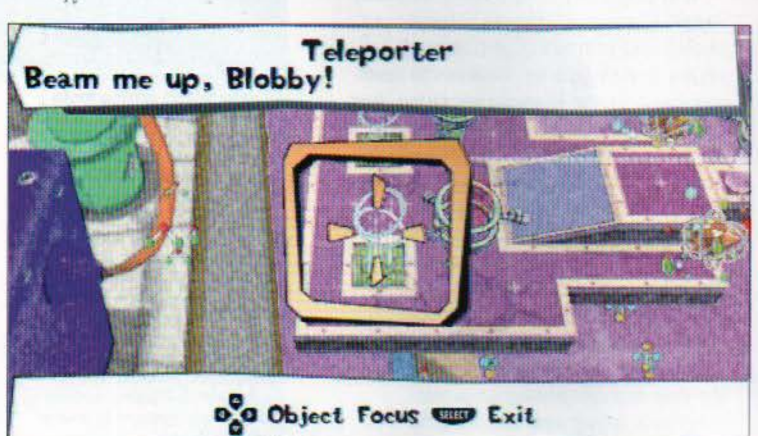
Teasing out tactics through exhaustive trial and error, aspects of the game are still hard and unforgiving. Strategies build through confidence, with continuing progression reward enough for outsmarting the devices you're set to overcome. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that difficulty levels decrease as a result of your increasing expertise. Just as you smugly imagine that the next stage will be easily assailable, you're forced to multitask or to understand the acute physical implications of having to steer your metal upside down. Failure is pervasive and inevitable, but engenders determination rather than aggravation. And that satisfying determination is only one small step away from helpless addiction.

First glances will inevitably draw parallels with *Marble Madness* and *Super Monkey Ball* but such comparisons now sell it short. *Meltdown* deserves its own unique place amongst rolling puzzlers and, eventually, to have its timelessness and solidity recognised as a benchmark. **[7]**





You can unlock various new skins for your mercury, along with a small set of well- crafted party games. This pool ball is probably a reference to the developer's own *Pool Paradise*. The emphasis on colour mixing remains but is now helped along by an instructive diagram in the top right of the screen



Another step towards mainstream accessibility is *Mercury Meltdown*'s free-look mode. Pressing Select on any given stage will talk you through its salient features as well as showing off the new-look cel-shaded graphics







DEEP LABYRINTH

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£16) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: INTERACTIVE BRAINS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E145



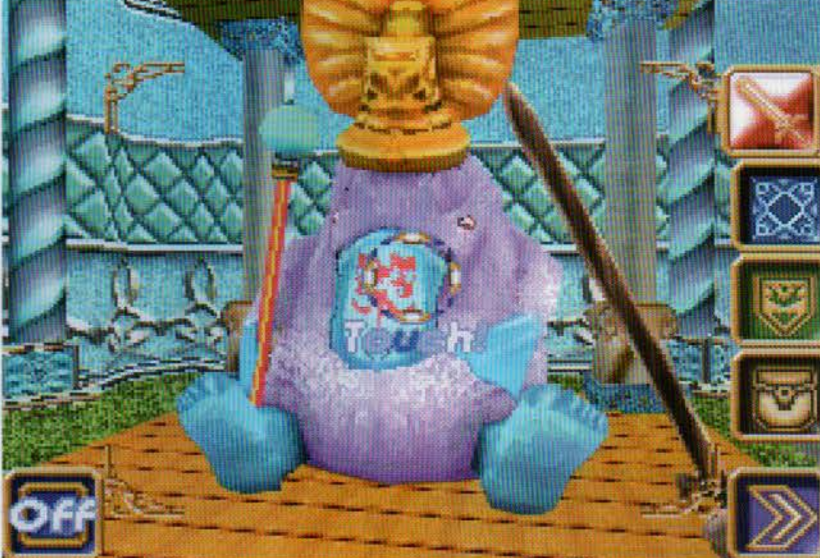
Classically, dungeon crawlers have never asked for much from their audience, from the typical simplicity of their graphic styling – down to their ASCII roots – to a mathematical approach to conquest. *Deep Labyrinth*, born as it was for a mobile phone audience, at best asks for little more than some spare time to kill.

An adventure split across two quests – the second a port of its original mobile release and the first a drastically tonally different DS exclusive – there's certainly more than enough ground to cover. The first quest breaks in newcomers perhaps too softly with a saccharine-sweet coating. Never assured enough in its own mechanics to drop the player's hand, the quest's opening hours force constant and endless interaction with over-cute characters and limp storyline interjections before finally swinging the doors open to the dungeon underneath. The second quest skips the pretence and remains truest to its form, a point which might be lost in its wrong-ordered shuffle.

Regardless of your starting point, the first creature you'll have to come to grips with is the touchscreen makeover, which could have been more refined. With four-direction movement mapped to the D-pad or buttons, all other controls are stylus-based, with swiping sword sweeps and pattern-drawn spells, down to – most laboriously – an icon that must be held simply to raise your shield. Were the mechanics approached with more finesse, it could have been a refreshing experiment in interface design. As it stands, repeatedly tapping or scratching away at the screen to unleash each round of attacks grows increasingly tiresome without any accompanying underlying strategy, and only proves itself to be a cumbersome illusion.

As you delve deeper into its dungeons, that cloudy illusion dissipates even further. Unlike its crawler contemporaries, and for all its twisted halls, this labyrinth is still largely a linear one, both in progression and in expansion. Its loot, the hallmark reward of the genre, is doled out at a steady pace, and only rarely for taking special risks or stepping into territory you know you shouldn't. In fact, almost never does the game provide any of that characteristic excitement of beating a hasty retreat; instead offering a simple, constant forward momentum.

Over time, *Deep Labyrinth*'s humble origins become ever more apparent. Never intended to be as deep as its dungeons, its simple, break-time origins are obvious in its by-the-numbers approach to the genre. On balance, its lack of ambition is supported only by a very basic underlying solidity in its execution: too weak to tackle bigger monsters, but strong enough to soldier on with some perseverance. **[4]**





Even considering the game's leisurely approach to combat, up-close spellcasting can quickly be reduced to a series of frustrated and frantic scribbles and is generally not something to be recommended



Deep Labyrinth's magic system comes in the form of these 'Kirie' patterns, a 3x3 grid with various combinations and characters yielding different spells



Though occasionally properly immense and terrifying, battles with the game's boss creatures, as with many of its regular battles, can more often than not be too easily subverted with well-timed circle-strafing and sword hits

3D realms



The original 2004 release of *Deep Labyrinth* was a landmark for its particular sector as the first major mobile game release to feature a fully polygonal 3D world. Split into a series of downloadable chapters, the game's firstperson combat system was similarly custom-tailored to fit a mobile interface by way of its so-called GRAPE system, or 'GRAphical Pattern InterfacE.' As illustrated here, the grid of *Labyrinth*'s magic system makes more sense as a converted holdover of the mobile original's dial-a-spell contrivance.



DEFCON

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $15 (£8) (STEAM) £10 (DIRECT)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VALVE/INTROVERSION
DEVELOPER: INTROVERSION PREVIOUSLY IN: E160

Nuclear policy



Providing both an opportunity to batter the game into something more strategic and an insight into the pains of development, the options are *Defcon*'s saving grace. Office mode is inspired, if incidental to the game's flaws, allowing matches to be played in realtime for up to six hours by default, notifying players of attention-worthy events. Rules can then determine who controls the speed of play, how the game is scored (by kills, survivors or both), cities and population per territory, and territories per player. Units can also be assigned to a credit rather than fixed system, allowing greater deployment possibilities. There's also an option to change the scale of the map – not a zoom, but a universal expansion of territory.

What you're looking at from the off in *Defcon* is the face of a machine: Wargames' WOPR in all but trademarked name. Rendered perfectly with shimmering vectors and bold Suprematist type, it's cold and unflinching, versed exclusively in the arithmetic of mass destruction. Isotope classifications, half-lives, projected megadeaths and notes on radiation sickness flicker impassively across its title screen, waiting for you to log in and execute the associated formulae.

Beyond lies a multiplayer game of strikingly simple military manoeuvring, far purer than its spiritual, singleplayer forebear from 1987, Martech's *The Armageddon Man*. There the countdown to doomsday was negotiable, even avoidable; here it is inexorable. Split into five consecutive time periods – one for each of the USAF's Defence Conditions – *Defcon* gives up to five players their own cache of various air, ground and naval units to arrange and command, all of which perform one or more very simple offensive or defensive functions – often both.

Under Defcons 5 and 4 only deployment, movement and communication are allowed, the game encouraging players to arrange their rocket silos around their key cities, establish a radar network close to hostile borders, form fragile allegiances with each other and plot the courses of their various naval fleets. At Defcon 3 comes the authority to send fighters on recon missions, or bombers off for a pre-emptive strike. At Defcon 1, when the pieces are in place but only hints of strategy revealed, it's time to climb under that nest of pillows and furniture, tuck into a can of cold beans, and press the button.

Or is it? In a game of fixed resources and limited micromanagement, how much does timing decide the balance of power? In this case, greatly at first – a thrilling illusion while it lasts – but ultimately not enough. This is a game of few variables, as are several of the very best, but also few equations. The restrictions of the Defcon stages, the strengths and weaknesses of the different units and the brief time windows of matches overall (you can slow down the clock, but play slows with it), shape them from so many angles that only a small margin remains in which players can experiment.

Alliances attempt to introduce a level of unpredictable humanity, but the mechanism is strict, betrayal proving inevitable, and as it happens essential. *Defcon* is also hamstrung somewhat by its desire for authenticity, the positions of territories and their major cities unbalancing it at its most basic level. Put simply, if WWIII is fought by these rules, make sure you're in Europe.

Introversion creates games from ideas while most others do the opposite, which is a great example to set, but one characterised by these triumphs of vision over durability. The developer's cleverest tactic here, beyond creating a game that's worth it for the presentation alone, has been to throw open so many of its rules to player customisation. It's both a humble admission and generous proposition, both of which you'll be hypnotised into accepting. **[7]**

AI bots prove a hollow gesture for solo players, and even for those in search of an offline sparring partner. Their capacity for experimentation seems non-existent



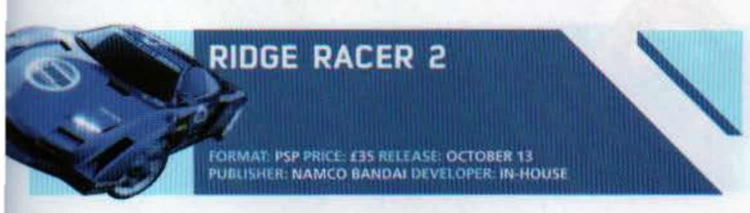




Surpassing even the lofty standards set by *Darwinia*, Michael Maidment's soundtrack is an apt accompaniment to the winter of the world. A masterclass in understatement, its muted thumps, delicate piano chords and vocal effects are chilling reminders of what those light blooms represent



Simple at first, *Defcon*'s interface knows when to submit to clutter. Missile strikes pile megadeath upon megadeath



RIDGE RACER 2

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OCTOBER 13
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The reinstated checkpoints of Arcade mode do little to differentiate it from a standard race, first place ultimately requiring just as consistent a display of skill. Other additions include the Survival elimination mode and fan favourite, Duel

Ridge Racer 2 is an exercise in completism doomed, for reasons of presentation and price, to be considered one of opportunistic laziness as well. Apology and insult combined, it's keen to fill the holes in the *Ridge Racer* greatest hits anthology, but never justifies the number in its name. Fractional improvements include eight new tracks (playable as mirrored and reversed variants), three new play modes and some minor gloss for its lighting system. All of which will be appreciated solely by the *Ridge Racer* faithful, almost all of whom will be upgrading rather than purchasing afresh.

To the layperson, potentially unconcerned with the significance of *Ridge Racer: Type 4*, this is the exact same game that launched with PSP. What was unbroken there remains unfixed, the sterilised interface still among gaming's best, the three drift systems still exploring series tradition without breaking it, the nitrous gauge still offering incentive to slide without throwing the game off-balance. Nothing controversial there, which is



more than can be said for the lack of anticipated infrastructure support. Leaving play limited to local area networks, Namco has essentially shrugged off an arguable raison d'etre.

But truth be told, online shortcomings don't define *Ridge Racer 2* any more than the series has been defined by multiplayer generally. Its real opponents have always been the numbers, ticking away beneath the rear-view mirror, separating you and the AI pacemaker, or counting the seconds to a track record. Moreover, something that PSP continues to enhance is the sense of personal connection between Ridge City and its guests. The newly integrated *Type 4* tracks represent the series at its most sensual, and its trackside choreography at its most indulgent. Passing jetliners invite you to chase them into hairpin drifts; an airship basks beneath sunbeams; balloon fiestas warm above the city lights; fireworks applaud victory. All at PSP resolution. All for you.

Sceptics will be justified, because *Ridge*'s complete failure to reward veterans by recognising their saves, or even mixing up its career structure, is a corner that should never have been cut. But for a repeat performance, it's a stubbornly hot ticket. **[7]**



The efficiency of *Ridge*'s recompilation makes it impossible to tell whether the sporadic aliasing, inconsistent textures and ability to invoke PSP's dreaded ghosting artefacts are truly unavoidable



BOMBERMAN: ACT ZERO

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OCTOBER
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: HUDSON

With *Act Zero*, Hudson has chosen to jam itself between a bomb and a hard place. Despite the full price, it's a game with only as much content as would be expected of a Live Arcade instalment of the long-serving *Bomberman* franchise, and so to compensate it has dressed itself up in unattractively dark clothes and has attempted to add some girth – rather than depth – with some three-dimensional solidity. It's difficult not to see it as an exercise in cynicism: the characteristic Liquorice Allsorts sweetness of *Bomberman*'s visuals has been poorly reinvented as a generic futuristic wasteland, and its role flipped from poppy party-game favourite to a sombre gauntlet of bomb-dropping and dodging.

Offline, solo players have access to two modes, Standard and First-Person Battle. The former offers the traditional one-hit kills played out via an overhead view of the entire arena, while the latter adds a life gauge along with full camera control, which only serves as an obstruction to the fundamental play of grid-running bomb tag. It's a souring of *Bomberman*'s classic formula, and it hasn't been compensated for with any new thinking, leaving older editions to continue reigning supreme.

Still, there's a core of goodness about *Act Zero* which survives all this, and it comes to the fore in the World Battle mode, the game's online arena, where eight people can take part in enjoyably twitchy *Bomberman* scuffles.



Character customisation is threadbare, limited to gender and outfit colour, the latter of which can be garish enough to mark out opponents in the dingy arenas. The solo modes offer numerous levels to churn through – with little change in presentation – but no room to save progress, reducing them to survival challenges

They'll remain entertaining for as long as the servers retain some kind of activity, a population that looks set to dwindle to dangerously low numbers far too soon. Which brings us round to that opening point again, of the blatant success that's laying in wait for a Live Arcade *Bomberman*, primed to provide a renaissance that *Act Zero* is so far from achieving. Until then, you're left with a misfire of a game that, despite the potential of its host console, has failed to understand either the appeal of the series or the preferences of western gaming audiences. **[3]**





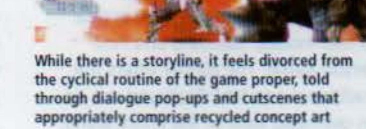
Unbelievably, *Act Zero* has no capacity for local multiplayer, not that the overhead perspective offers the colourful simplicity of previous *Bomberman* titles. It's an omission that rams home the scrawniness of *Act Zero*'s content, and a sober tone that's not best suited to the friendly jostle of same-screen play



BOUNTY HOUNDS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£22) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: XPEC





While there is a storyline, it feels divorced from the cyclical routine of the game proper, told through dialogue pop-ups and cutscenes that appropriately comprise recycled concept art

Bounty Hounds is a lesson in discerning cannibalism that teaches first by example. What it's taken from *Phantasy Star Online* and *Untold Legends* has been assembled into a relatively tight, undeniably intelligent handheld package, one that makes your mission – to hack and slash the reusable parts from wave upon wave of alien marauders – immediately rewarding.

The pattern of play is entirely familiar. From his home base of QuickSilver (a mothership with all the neon of *PSO*'s Pioneer 2 but an almost monotone palette), hero Maximillian beams down to various worlds to audition them for terraforming. The indigenous welcoming parties are universally hostile, spawn-happy to the point of absurdity and capably, if neither diversely nor imaginatively, designed. Though Taiwanese studio Xpec is developer, there's a technical bravado expressed by each planet that Namco has made its PSP trademark. Smoothly defined and graced with a spectrum of blooms, they set a barren yet attractive stage for the fireworks of the game's relentless melee.



Passages between zones and mission waypoints are clearly marked on the inset map, but it's still possible to lose your bearings when the action peaks, and not always easy to recover them

Navigating while battling the hordes can be frustrating, the avatar magnetised to the ground, unable to muster even the slightest dodge or hop the most incidental rock or crevasse. But the combat system is reward enough for those that persevere. Maximillian is a complex yet manageable framework of user-defined slots, replete with spaces for armours, weapons and abilities that the harvest of enemies almost immediately fills. A dual-wield system is mapped to the Square and Circle buttons, and the ease with which salvaged blades and firearms can be coupled for variable range combos is exemplary. Likewise, your arsenal of attack modifiers can be brought to bear with taps of Triangle and Cross.

Wifi deathmatch and singleplayer survival modes offer peripheral kicks, but without the upgrade trees, collectables and trading systems of the main quest they remain entirely incidental. *Bounty Hounds* is essentially a magpie's indulgence, successful because it condenses the forage/recycle dynamic of *PSO* into such a furious and efficient, if simple, experience. In the great crapshoot of Namco thirdperson action games, it's a better than average throw. **[6]**



SCURGE HIVE

FORMAT: DS (VERSION TESTED), GBA PRICE: $30, $20 (£16, £11) RELEASE: OCTOBER 1 (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: SOUTHPEAK INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: ORBITAL MEDIA

A lone female bounty hunter, setting out across space to investigate the depopulated ruins of a remote research station, bound in a suit that can absorb the energy of the aggressive organisms that have overtaken the surroundings: *Scurge Hive* clearly doesn't hold its influences too tightly to its chest.

It certainly has the structure down pat – the dripfeed of weapon and suit upgrades that allow you to push further out and around in concentric circles around you – but it's decided that what Samus really needed was simply more things to blast. And more, and more still. Sadly, what it hasn't been quite perfected is in how to craft the balance between that action and the exploration.

Instead of creating a more cohesive world with creatures going through their own unphased paces – upping the suspense when you encounter those truly aggressive ones that have their sights set squarely on you – each of the areas you'll traverse in *Scurge* feel like they've simply had a box of random enemies shaken into it, all making a sudden focused beeline toward you the minute you set foot in the room. It's an unrelenting danger, to be sure, and provides a constant need for fast action, but it heavily undercuts the joy of exploring for the



Apart from her basic blaster, Jenosa's upgraded weapons provide her with more powerful attacks against certain classes of enemies, but can conversely strengthen those of an opposite class



A light levelling system rewards mass kills with extra health, but never truly feels like character advancement as much the weapon upgrades do

keycards and waypoints you require to push further, and eventually becomes a banal distraction from the more important tasks at hand.

To give the game a smart, strategic kick, instead of a simple life-meter, hero Jenosa is herself terminally infected with a disease that requires constant attention, symbolised by a secondary meter steadily creeping up to dangerous life-depleting levels. This can be brought under control by finding save-point rooms which to both replenish energy and start the timer over, but ultimately serves as another unwelcome distraction from your task, even with the save points scattered liberally across the map.

Seemingly built on top of the glossy isometric engine that made Orbital's Racing Gears Advance an otherwise excellent portable racer, shoehorned into providing platforming action it consistently struggles to convey the proper depth and precision necessary for the intuitive aiming and tricky jumps the game demands, hampered further by oil-slicked controls for both the camera and Jenosa herself.

It's a shame, in the end, that Orbital hadn't taken more careful notes when it cribbed from Nintendo, because, done right, the proposition of *Metroid*-gone-isometric wouldn't be quite as hard to swallow. **[4]**


Captive

TIME EXTEND

CAPTIVE

FORMAT: **AMIGA, PC, ST**
PUBLISHER: **MINDSCAPE**
DEVELOPER: **ANTONY CROWTHER**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **1990**

Trapped in front of a computer screen with no sense of how much time had passed: Captive truly got inside its players' minds

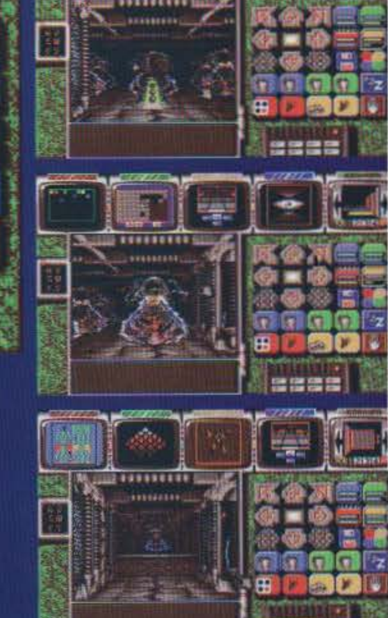
Videogames have a short history – a few decades as an idea, just over a quarter-century as big business – and yet they've long had a fixation for their own past. Just how early on did the first gamer shrug dismissively and say: "Yeah, but they're not as good as they used to be"? What was he holding in his hands which made him say it? Which game was the first to give someone a thrill of nostalgia? It seems that for almost as long as gaming has had an identity, it's ben a split one: a low-grade, affectionate war between those who think it's in decline and those who think that progress speaks for itself. And those battle-lines are now themselves becoming fossilised: old games provided a truer challenge, offered more variety, didn't let anything get in the way of the fun. New games look better, work better and don't set out to punish their players. Pick your side and settle in.

Sit down with Captive and you'll see that its story has one of the neatest framings yet seen in games, but the meat of it is familiar

But is the argument founded on anything more than the love of an argument? Sit down with *Captive* and you'll see that it is. Its story has one of the neatest framings yet seen in games, but the meat of it is familiar: you control a party of four warriors, you explore complexes based on planets, killing enemies and collecting kit and exp. Find the end, set your charges, and flee before the whole



Finding the door to enter each base was the first challenge on any planet, and often meant negotiating a maze of grassy clearings and inexplicably threatening trees, behind which tiny lizards or enormous diplodocuses could hide



Buying Dev-scapes and Optics amplified your view of the world, providing map, compass, radar, improved vision and repair facilities among other abilities – while inflicting a risky drain on your battery power



FUTURE PROOF

It may not seem that long ago, but 1990 predates the invention of the word 'laptop' and so *Captive* is played on what its protagonist calls a 'briefcase computer thing'. Crowther may have been behind the curve on the miniaturisation process, but he hit the spot with the contraption's Chinese-language option menu. It's hard to click on it without thinking of Beijing-founded Lenovo's buy-out of IBM's iconic PC and laptop division. The conceit that you're playing the part of someone playing on a laptop was persuasive enough when hunched in front of an Amiga or ST monitor, but now that technology has overtaken the game, emulation fans have the option of full physical immersion in the game's storyline – assuming they can find a disused store-room with a plug-point and an intravenous food supply.

structure explodes. And then, once you've located the next base, you repeat. But before you can begin, you must – quite literally – plug in your brain. As if it knew the generation of smarter-vs-dumber, old-vs-new arguments that were to follow, the game opens with a statement of intent. The brains you plug in may be those of your dormant droids, but the message is clear: sit up, breathe deep. This isn't going to be easy, and you're going to need your wits around you. This is what old games do that new games don't.



Much celebrated since, the occasional Guru Meditation error that appeared to interrupt the link with your bots was an Amiga in-joke, with the potential to both delight or infuriate ST players

And then the next thing that happens does the same. Once inside the first base, you hit a brick wall, again quite literally. You can see from the rollers underneath it that it should be moveable but – unless you've had the self-discipline to read the manual – it just won't budge. Not if you run into it, not if you throw dynamite at it, not if you shower it in electric sparks. It just sits there stoically, a physical barrier between you and your enjoyment of the game. But later (once the light has dawned and you've *right-clicked* the movement button to shunt the wall out of the way) you'll hit plenty more virtual barriers – brutal difficulty spikes, bugged puzzles that can't be solved, mazes you can trap yourself in with no remedy but a reset. This is what old games do that new games don't.

You may not be able to remember your name, but you soon realise that your only hope of escape lies in a machine you unearth from a pile of supplies

But by then, you're hooked. Not least thanks to that story. You play th Captive of the title, a man found guilty of unnamed crimes and sentenced by a 26th century court to 250 years suspended animation. You wake an unknown number of years later, alone in your cell, surrounded b the debris of a war you know nothing about. You may not be able to remember your name or where you are, but you soon realise that your only hope of escape lies in a machine you unearth from a pile of supplies thrown into your cell by the now-

Uprgrading droid parts to a new model was a painful joy – joy because of their increased strength and pain because of the higher repair costs





Once each base was successfully destroyed, you remained trapped on the planet's surface until you could find your lander. With no access to repair shops or electricity recharge points, the threat of marauding dinosaurs was significant



Captive's greatest agony came if you destroyed a base before retrieving a probe (bottom) with which to locate the next (below). Hours of trial-and-error clicking, or a restart, were the only way to progress

absent army. A remote control unit (see 'Future proof') for four military droids, you plan to use them to find your location – to bust yourself out of jail by proxy. You'll know you're safe when you can see them looking at you, looking at them looking at you.

It's a powerful set-up for a game, not least because it side-steps a thorny problem. The big risk in giving the player a rescue mission is that they might not give a damn about who they are supposed to save. Not everyone – not by a long chalk – has a soft spot for Peach, or Zelda, or Natalya, and being asked to take desperate measures for someone you'd just as happily see moulder is one of gaming's perennial annoyances. But in *Captive* it's guaranteed you'll want to save the day, because it's your own day you're saving. Most games ask you to be a generic hero – to-ing and fro-ing as you play patsy to an audience of unmoved NPCs. But in *Captive* you're victim, hero and audience in one. From the start you dream of the moment you'll open a door and find out what you look like.

But when that moment arrives, something entirely unexpected happens. Your mission completed, and your rescue effected, the game gives you a choice. Accept your victory and end the game, or allow yourself to be recaptured and re-hidden, and set out on a new cycle of planets, bases and puzzles. Current game design theory subscribes to the idea that a game's story provides the motivation for you to keep playing; *Captive* set up an unusually strong narrative impetus and then nonchalantly torpedoes it, confident that its own mechanics will by then have become motivation enough in their own right.

But what makes the freshness of the story, and the audacity of the final twist, all the more striking is that *Captive* is that most creatively bankrupt of game genres: the clone. Antony Crowther, who was responsible for every aspect of the game's design and execution barring the music and the testing provided by his brother, was always frank about *Dungeon Master*'s role in inspiring *Captive*. The superficial similarities are plain from screenshots, and structurally the emphasis on combat, switch puzzles and exploration make the inheritance clear. And it's here that the question of old versus new



Captive had almost endless potential for last-ditch battles. Trapping opponents under doors was a key tactic, but the last resort remained pelting enemies with the body parts of your fallen robot comrades





NEVERENDING STORY

Captive's looping plot – assuming you refuse to be rescued and settle instead for watching yourself being snatched back through a fake wall by your unknown imprisioners – means the game is effectively infinite. The algorithm which generates each world produces a total of 65,535 levels, and there are no reliable reports of anyone having enough staying power to go the distance. Of course, while rescuing yourself is obviously a great source of motivation, the chance to condemn yourself to another cycle of incarceration may well have played into the hands of more than a few tortured teenagers keen to score a few self-loathing points while they played.





The Chinese-language icon for the options menu wasn't the only bit of future-casting Crowther worked into his design. In a neat touch the 'briefcase computer' itself featured a logo formed of an Atari 'A,' an IBM 'I' and a Commodore 'C'.

makes itself felt again. In theory, you might think that cloning old games would be a more mechanistic and limited process than cloning new ones: the level of elaboration is now so much higher that surely there's more scope for innovation within the framework that's being copied. But part of what's been lost is that instinct for iteration. The old culture of game design was based on taking someone else's work, taking it apart and rebuilding it to your own tastes: not necessarily looking to improve on the original, or fix its perceived mistakes, but just to find out what would happen if *you* made one of *those*. And that, combined with the fierce sense of individuality that a true auteur's solo creation inevitably carried, produced this strange tension between creativity and copycatting which no longer seems to be possible: both are still common, but it's rare to find them combined.

And that creativity found a perfect expression in the machines available to it at the time. There's a theory of rollercoaster design that by overbuilding the framework – adding more struts and spars than are structurally required – you can make it scarier, adding to the sense of speed, proximity and danger as they rush through your eyeline. *Captive* gets its scares by *under*building, using the technical limitations it faced to enhance the sense of threat. The flat



trees have faces like monsters, their impenetrable sprites turning something which in modern games would be a dense, monotonous fores into a maze of mirrors, a flickering, unending nightmare. Inside, the corridors are designed to disorientate punishing a careless couple of turns with an optical illusion of identical passages. Outside, even something a benign as the grass feels sinister, seething back and forth between its two frames of animation. All told, *Captive* still stands as one of the best realised games ever produced, a seamless patchwork of mechanics, story and visuals.

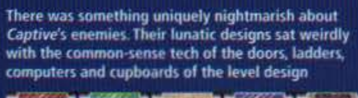
Despite how well *Captive* functions as a metaphor for old games, those mechanics are relentlessly modern. Sixteen years ag no one was using the word emergen but everyone who played the game found themselves setting ambushes for enemies under slider doors, hidin behind panels and waiting it out while reflected shots battered their pursuers to a slow, but economical, death or taking last-ditch advantage of the wall-demolishing flames whic swept through each level after they'





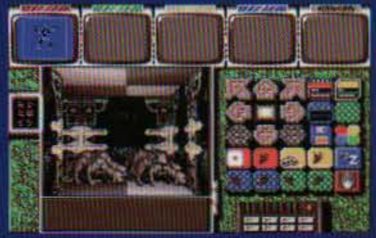
Fleeing the fires you set at the heart of each base was routinely terrifying, especially if you'd forgotten the door code (left) to escape. Rolling the handy die infuriatingly only revealed the code for internal doors, not the exit




There was something uniquely nightmarish about *Captive*'s enemies. Their lunatic designs sat weirdly with the common-sense tech of the doors, ladders, computers and cupboards of the level design






Collecting code-containing clipboards was essential for progress, but meant battling gruesome man-things, whose normal appearance was shattered when their heads ballooned and gaped to attack

Naming droids was a critical process, since the letters governed the starting stats of each robot. If you found a winning combination (like 'Zak') it was tempting to use the same name for all droids, maxing out your abilities but leaving you reliant on colour-coding

Games are closely integrated with their time – the pace of technology sees to that – and that means the best of them can never be superseded

detonated their dynamite. The Dev-scapes and Optics which plugged into the droids' expansion slots produced a mixed-perspective take on battle, reinterpreting the main view of your adventure through five additional screens: radar, remote cameras, auto-mappers. It still feels as bold today as it did first time round.

Released in 1990, *Captive* stands at the halfway mark of the videogame industry – of the videogame industry so far. It's been a short journey from cutting-edge to nostalgia trip, and as the years go by it may come to look less like a staging post between old and new and more a representative of the first half-century of gaming's infancy. Who knows how it might look come 2542, the year *Captive*'s hero went on trial? And it's from that perspective that the wrangles over retro become irrelevant. It's true the game offers an experience which is distinct from that offered by modern games, and it's true that it's a distinction with as many blessings as curses, but what matters isn't that it's old, or better or worse than what had come before. What matters is that games are uniquely closely integrated with their time – the pace of technology sees to that – and that means the best of them can never be superseded. There may be better games – have already been better games – but nothing will ever be made that takes fuller advantage of what could be done at the time. And that ensures that it, and other 'old' standard-bearers can still – and will always – stand shoulder to shoulder with the 'new'.

THE MAKING OF...
TOEJAM AND EARL

Forget Myst – virtual tourism really started back on the Mega Drive with two aliens crashing into an oddly familiar planet

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **MEGA DRIVE** PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **JOHNSON-VOORSANGER PRODUCTIONS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1991**

Titles that arrive in the early years of a console's life face a different kind of scrutiny than those that follow. Still judged in terms of gameplay and design, they must also do something more: encapsulate that elusive 'next generation difference', justifying an expensive hardware purchase by performing tricks the older machines never could.

In the case of the Sega Mega Drive, it was *Sonic* that would eventually hold the title of next-gen definer. But few games chose to match *Sonic* for sheer speed, and it's perhaps another title that showcased the real advancement that the 16bit machines had made over their 8bit predecessors: that of characterisation.

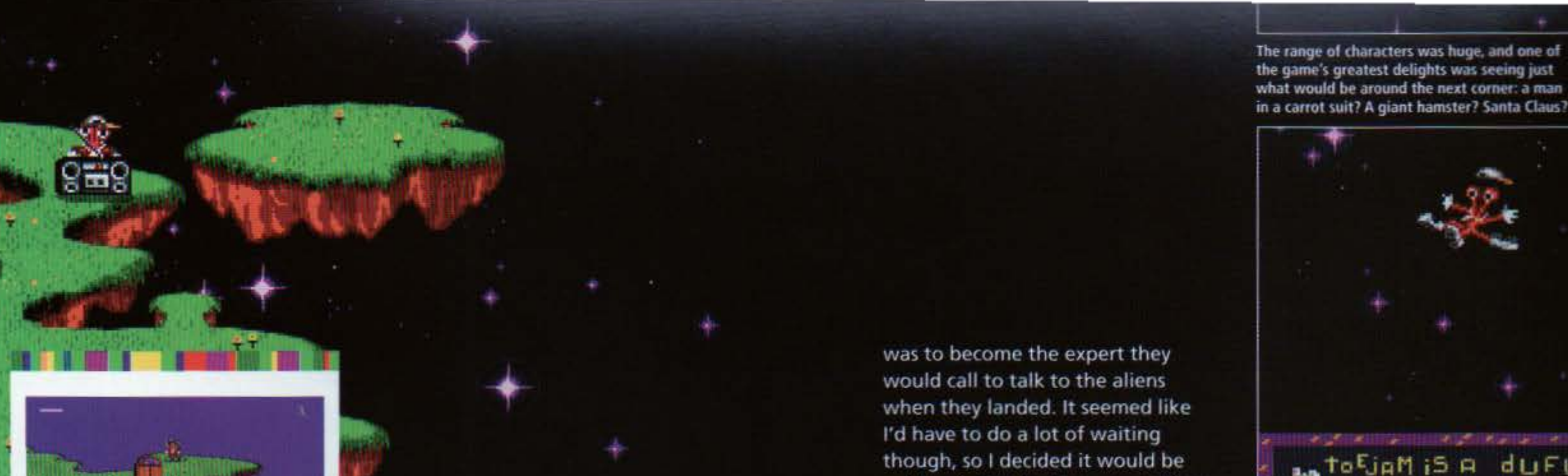
The proof was in the details, lovingly captured through tiny, seemingly unnecessary animations. For the first time, characters would move and jump in their own distinctive ways, or fidget if left by themselves. Even Sonic tapped his feet impatiently if he stood still long enough. But that was nothing compared to the range of activities ToeJam and Earl could get up to. On a mission to collect the various shards of their crashed spaceship, they regularly fell asleep, danced with hula girls or burped if they drank too much root beer. And while none of these activities were central to the gameplay, they were crucial to the title's appeal as a cutting-edge marvel.

Relaxed and funny, *ToeJam & Earl* was a leisurely wander-'em-up, and for a while it seemed like the duo might be destined for great things. "It looked like we might become Sega's Mario," says **Greg Johnson**, the game's creator and designer. "But then Japan shipped in *Sonic The Hedgehog* and said: '*ToeJam & Earl* is out – *Sonic* is in'. Oh well."

"It looked like we might become Sega's Mario, But then Japan shipped in Sonic The Hedgehog and said 'ToeJam & Earl is out'"

Disappointments aside, *ToeJam & Earl* still allowed Johnson to fulfil a personal ambition. "I got my BS degree in bio-linguistics from UC San Diego. My secret plan





The range of characters was huge, and one of the game's greatest delights was seeing just what would be around the next corner: a man in a carrot suit? A giant hamster? Santa Claus?

TOEJAM WITH EARL

One of the most ambitious features of the game was its co-op mode, in which two players could wander about the map independently. "Oh, the split screen. Sega said it couldn't be done on the hardware, but we didn't believe them," says Johnson. "Yes, hard to make work, but worth it. Me and Mark played the game together a lot as we built it. Without the co-op mode we couldn't have done that, so we had to put it in."

was to become the expert they would call to talk to the aliens when they landed. It seemed like I'd have to do a lot of waiting though, so I decided it would be quicker just to build my own aliens to talk to."

ToeJam and Earl weren't the first extra-terrestrials Johnson got involved with. *Starflight*, his first game, published by EA when they were just a small start-up company ("Life lesson number 26 – Get stock!" sighs Johnson) was a huge success. "It was the first game ever to go platinum on the PC. Up until that point no one thought the PC was a machine people wanted to play games on. Ha!" Further titles followed, but it was until he first met programmer Mark Voorsanger that things really clicked. "We actually met on the top of a mountain," recalls Johnson. "Mount Tam in Marin County. I said to him: 'How do you feel about aliens?' He said: 'Who the hell are you?' I said: 'Can you program?' He said: 'Get away from me'. Thus our partnership was born."

Regardless of what was actually said, the duo formed Johnson-Voorsanger productions, and started to work on the game that would become *ToeJam & Earl*. "It was a total *Rogue* rip-off," admits Johnson. "Don't tell anybody. That's totally common in the game world, find a game mechanic you love and rip it off."

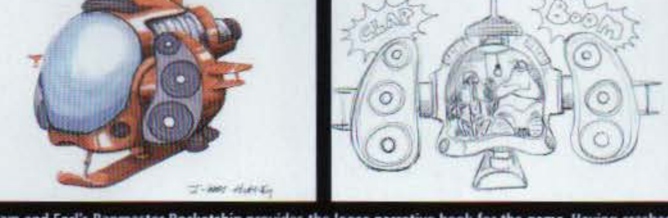
Yet it was the personalities that would define the game itself, a million miles away from the ASCII 'characters' of *Rogue*. Wry, flippant and contemporary when compared to Mario or Sonic, ToeJam and Ear stood apart from other game protagonists, not least because they seemed to have a genuine relationship with one another, bickering and joking around together on screen.

"The first thing I thought of was the two characters and how they talked to each other," recalls Johnson. He and Voorsanger approached Sega with their new idea. "They were into it from the start," he says. "They were really looking for content. It's way harde these days. Completely different."

Sega had next to no input during the development process. With an agreement in place, Johnson and Voorsanger were left alone to create their game as they wanted. With a team of just two, development could have been a lonely business, but Johnson remembers it as being a lot of fun "Yup, just us two chickens in the chicken coop. Mark programmed, did design, art and voice. The budget was crazy small – I think it was about $200,000 total. That's compared to today's game budge of anywhere from $1 million to $30 million."

Developing for the Mega Drive was not always easy, though. "Th biggest headache was the compile time. It took about 45 minutes fo each compile, which means that after every bug fix you had to sit and wait for 45 minutes while it recompiled to see if you really fixed it. Good thing Mark was so insanely meticulous."

Knowing they had a solid blueprint in *Rogue*, Johnson was confident the gameplay would work. "It's sort of a 'see how far you can get' kind of objective. That's why the random levels mak sense, because you replay the game each time to get farther."



ToeJam and Earl's Rapmaster Rocketship provides the loose narrative hook for the game. Having crashed and shattered into eight pieces, the player's job is to scour the landscapes to put it back together again





Level Zero is one of the game's most memorable Easter eggs. By falling through a doughnut-shaped island in the corner of the first map, our heroes can hang out with hula girls while drinking lemonade

With such a firmly playable basis, the game was free to develop its own famously unhurried personality. Much of the fun in *ToeJam & Earl* came from the presents the aliens collected as they wandered around. Many contained power-ups, and others were amusing but practically useless. Some were downright hazardous. Many games had Easter eggs built into them, but *ToeJam & Earl* seemed, at times, to have little else. It was generous gaming at its most breezy and confident. "The presents are just power-ups," says Johnson. "The notion of using things that are unidentified and being surprised by them wasn't my idea. I just came up with lots of silly power-ups and stuff."

At release, *ToeJam & Earl* was "a real sleeper game," says Johnson. "Sega didn't really know how to market it. It really grew by word of mouth, which is a much slower process. These days games don't stay on the shelves long enough for that to happen, so marketing is much more important. That's why you see so few original titles."

The game's eventual success meant sequels: 1993's *Panic On Funkotron* for the Mega Drive, and then, in 2002, *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth* on the Xbox. *Panic On Funkotron* was a side-scroller, and slightly more conventional than the original, even providing its own take on combat. Johnson puts the changes down to Sega's reaction to the first game. "It was so different from their other games though that they didn't really get it, and that's why we ended up changing the second game so much. In retrospect it was a bad idea. Recently Sega apologised for that so I feel better. I think it was a fun game, but it confused our fans. Sorry about that."

"You flip things on their head to get a new perspective. Humans are pretty darn scary. I don't think I'd want to crash-land here"

The enemies – earthlings, in a pleasing reversal – were another of the game's joys. Drawn by Johnson himself, and ranging from psychotic ice cream men to herds of camera-lugging tourists, they managed to work as recognisable stereotypes while also being twisted into something more original. "I guess it's just generally the nature of satire," muses Johnson. "You flip things on their head to get a new perspective. I mean, when you think about it, humans are pretty darn scary. I don't think I'd want to crash-land here."

The game's funk-influenced soundtrack also had its genesis with Johnson. "I sang the songs into a tape recorder, and [musician] John Baker listened to my mess and turned it into music that sounded OK."

Mission To Earth was a return to the sprawling levels and unhurried wandering of the original, but with a hub structure and a new playable character. Nostalgic but enjoyable in its own right, it's a strange jewel hidden amongst the Xbox's lesser-known titles. "That game got dissed," says Johnson, "but it has all the same gameplay elements [as the original] and it's way prettier."

It's questionable whether we'll ever see a return for the two aliens from Funkotron. Nickelodeon now has the movie rights, and Johnson admits he'd like to see *ToeJam & Earl* back on consoles one day. He's currently working on an entirely new game for the DS, and its emphasis may seem familiar to fans of his earlier titles. "It's really designed for people who don't play games much. It's pretty far outside the mainstream of gaming. And I might say it's got a very unusual art style and it's emotionally expressive." These are traits that unite many a DS title, and prove once again that *ToeJam & Earl* really was ahead of its time. Although they may have been eclipsed by Sonic, the hip-hop stylings and laid-back gaming of Johnson and Voorsanger's title were a million miles away from anything other developers were doing in the early '90s. "People loved the social aspect of the game," says Johnson, summing things up with pride. "It brought families together, which I always thought was cool."



RETURN TO FUNKOTRON

In a brilliant twist, the wandering and exploration didn't end when all parts of the spaceship had been collected and the game was completed. The end sequence, seeing the aliens returned to their home planet of Funkotron, allowed the player to explore that world, too. An idea so fresh and enjoyable, it's hard to see why it isn't more often imitated. "I've always been disappointed in game endings where they just give you a little movie," explains Johnson. "I thought that would be more fun."





The strange, winding level designs were ideal for random generation. Navigating the ledges was made easy by the game's generous controls, which would leave ToeJam (or Earl) teetering for a couple of seconds prior to a fall

Studio profile

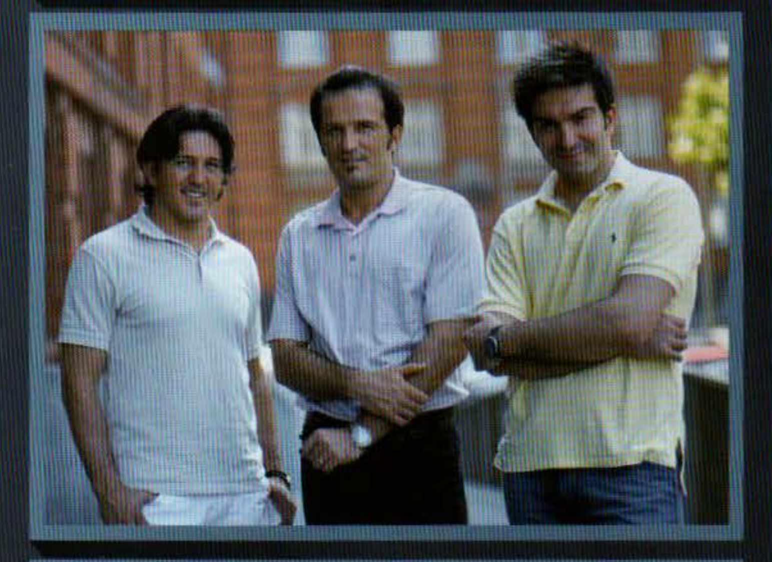
Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Crytek

DATE FOUNDED: May 1999

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 130

STUDIO HEADS: Cevat Yerli, Avni Yerli, Faruk Yerli (below)



URL: www.crytek.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Far Cry



A technological trailblazer, *Crysis* isn't just a poster child for PC hardware manufacturers. As a member of Microsoft's DirectX 10 advisory board, Crytek sits at the forefront of PC gaming generally





LOCATION:
Frankfurt - Germany

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Crysis and an unannounced next-gen title

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"We at Crytek are one of Europe's leading and fastest growing independent game developers; we've recently relocated into a brand new ultra-modern 30,000 square foot studio facility in Frankfurt, Germany. Our very first release, *Far Cry*, defined a new standard for FPS games and was an immediate runaway success.

"Building on the expertise we gained with our first product, we're now well on the way to shipping our second major title, *Crysis*. With *Crysis* and our own CryEngine 2 technology we have already re-established our international leadership position, receiving not only a great deal of favourable press but also a host of awards. Our relationships with leading game publishers, hardware manufacturers and software vendors give us the inside track on the newest, greatest ideas and technologies, which we use to make the most visually stunning and creatively challenging games.

"Our development team comes to us from all over the world, so of course all of our day to day internal communication and documentation is in English. Our goal is not just to be the best at what we do, but also to really enjoy ourselves while doing it."



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

New maths for games

Spun out of Cambridge University research, Geomerics says it can solve developers' hard problems thanks to better mathematics



Chris Doran, CEO, Geomerics

Considering the general fuss over whether school leavers (and even some university graduates) can do basic reading, writing and 'rithmetic, those who have successfully completed their education to become professional programmers might feel a little hurt to hear that all this time they've been using the wrong sort of maths.

Of course, for many of us, mathematics is a case of working out how many pints can be squeezed out of a ten pound note. But for game programmers, dealing with the intricacies of three-dimensional virtual space requires more than simple subtraction. It's in such rarefied realms of matrices and vectors that Geomerics, a technology start-up spun out of Cambridge University astrophysics research, hopes to make an impact.

"What game developers want is performance, control and stability"



Julian Davis, CTO, Geomerics

Its unique selling point is a type of mathematics called geometry algebra, which has proved particularly effective compared to standard linear algebra, when it comes to solving hardcore problems in quantum mechanics and electromagnetic theory. It's also been used in fields such as computer vision and robotics, but despite some interest from individual programmers, it hasn't yet been widely applied to videogames.



According to CEO **Chris Doran**, himself a veteran of years of research, it's the company's expertise, combined with the number of game-related areas geometry algebra can be used in, that gives the company its key advantage.

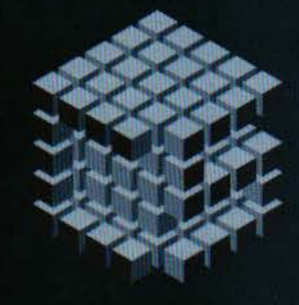
"Our underlying technology can be applied effectively to a wide range of problems from physics to radiosity," he explains. Indeed, its first product is one of the first solutions for realtime radiosity (see 'Let there be (reflected) light' for more details). Geomerics is also looking to see how it can improve the accuracy and speed of motion capture and animation.

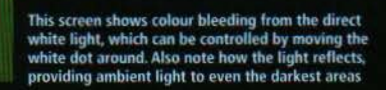
Of course, the fact few people understand exactly what Doran's selling is an issue. Instead of providing another faster, better, cheaper gizmo, Geomerics' success rests on selling stick-in-the-mud developers a completely new approach.



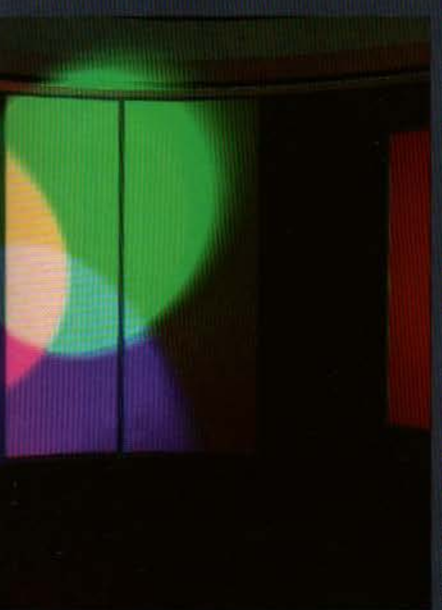
One area Geomerics has been looking to apply its technique to is rigid body physics, such as in this demo with thousands of interacting boulders rolling down a hill. The work remains in early stages







This screen shows colour bleeding from the direct white light, which can be controlled by moving the white dot around. Also note how the light reflects, providing ambient light to even the darkest areas



One vital element of Geomerics' realtime radiosity work is how dynamic coloured lights interact with the colour of the scene. In this example, the reflection of colour wheel light onto the stairs is red because it has been reflected from the red-coloured wall



Unlike the current ways of pre-calculating a static light map, Geomerics' solution means you can use dynamic in-game lights, with proper soft shadows as well as modelling colour reflections

Historically, such disruptive techniques haven't been accepted in an industry which has enough trouble hitting its deadlines without relearning how to develop games. For example, artists have been taking about the potential of moving from polygon-based model-making to movie-style procedural techniques such as sub-divisional surfaces for years. And while some developers have dipped their toes into the water, notably using Bezier curves for terrain generation, the conventional triangular standard remains firmly in place.

Doran reckons performance advantages combined with the way Geomerics is looking to get its technology into the hands of developers will overcome such obstacles however.

To make sure this is the case, **Julian Davis**, previously technical director at UK development house Kuju, has joined the firm. "What game developers want is performance, control and stability," he says. This, he explains, is an inherent part of what geometric algebra is all about.

"It's a language for talking about basic geometry operations, everything from collision functions to rotor interpolation," Davis says. "The library of functions that fall out of this language are highly efficient, have less special cases, are numerically more stable and easy to optimise for hardware."

This latter point is especially important as Geomerics' algorithms work well on the sort of multicore processors being used in PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. The move to make graphics cards into general-purpose processors is another plus. One of Geomerics' early demos mirrored the trend of running physics on graphics cards, for example. Another future plan for Doran is to get the technology hardwired into the chips of tomorrow.

That dream's a long way off at present, though. Day-to-day activity is instead focused on working with key developers to prove to the sceptics just what a difference this new way to do maths can actually have on the visual quality of games. Let's just hope it all adds up.

Let there be (reflected) light

One of the big reasons why even next-gen games don't look very realistic is the approximation realtime rendering engines make when it comes to dynamically lighting a scene. Sure, most engines can now handle the effects of a bunch of moving lights, but they still only model the direct beams, not their reflections or, more particularly, the interactions of those beams with the surfaces they're reflecting off.

"Radiosity describes the fact the world isn't just lit by lights but by light reflected off all surfaces, and that reflected light reflected off other surfaces and so on," explains Davis. Radiosity is the reason red-walled rooms feel warm, for example, while light blue ones seem cooler.

"Geometric algebra provides us with an all-encompassing methodology for solving these kinds of problems," Davis says. "We basically go back to first principles, reformulate the problem using the approach of geometric algebra and this typically suggests new solutions."

Previously, the problem with realtime radiosity is that it has been too processor intensive to be calculated in realtime. For this reason, developers have fudged the issue by pre-computing static lighting maps. These can't react to dynamic lighting, making a game look subtly wrong.

Using geometric algebra, Davis claims Geomerics can offer developers a solution that will look great and realistically handle dynamic lights at the same time. He says it also handles soft shadows, integrates smoothly with techniques such as normal and gloss mapping, and supports high dynamic range lighting effects.

Using it won't change the way developers make games either. "One of the nice features of our technique is that it's pretty independent of authoring, there's no new surface tagging or special rules for the artists," Davis points out. There is a pre-processing step involved, however. Davis says it's much quicker than previous techniques which often required hours of compute time for each scene.

But aside from the smarts involved, what's more important to Geomerics from a business point of view is how it gets the technology into developers' hands. Initially it's looking to work closely with a developer to integrate its code directly into an engine, as well as being on hand to sort out any resulting problems. "We're talking to a number of developers at the moment; it's a question of finding the right game at the right point of development," Davis reveals.

In the medium term, another option will be working with middleware engine providers and in that way target the most potential clients in the most resource-efficient manner. Either way, the earliest we're likely to see geometric algebra-powered games is 2007

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

THE BEARD REMAINS OPEN

BY JEFF MINTER

Bah. My ox360 has blown up. I admit I tend to just leave it switched on all the time even if I'm not using it, which probably isn't the best thing for it, but nonetheless I wouldn't expect it to, y'know, actually blow up. But the other day when I went to download *Time Pilot* from Live Arcade I found it in a locked-up state with random pixels all over the display and making a horrible shrieking noise. I restarted it and it was OK until the download was about 86 per cent finished, at which point the pixels and shrieking noise returned.

I left it well turned off for a couple of days, thinking in that hopeful-but-not-really-believing-it way that 'a rest might do it some good', then turned it on and finished my interrupted *Time Pilot* download (it did this seamlessly without me asking; can't fault the Dashboard). All seemed fine so I started

> I'm not too shabby at Time Pilot once I get my eye in; I've been round all the time zones five times in one game on my MAME cab

warming up on *Time Pilot* with an eye on demolishing some of the scores on my friends' leaderboard. I'm not too shabby at *Time Pilot* once I get my eye in; I've been round all the time zones five times in one game on my MAME cab and I was looking forward to laying down a little smack.

First game – nice start, got a bunch of Achievements all in one go, died just due to not paying attention just shy of 100,000 – good. A little practice and I'll soon be up to speed. After the game ends I go to look at the Achievements page to see just what I won, and the screen goes black.

I still don't want to believe that my 360 is dying, so I convince myself that it could just be a glitch in the software. I restart the machine, fire up *Time Pilot* again and have a second go. I make a messy start but recover quite nicely, passing the 100,000 mark without too much of a problem. Another few games and I should have my eye in enough to make mincemeat of some friends' scores, so I settle down and start a new game.

About halfway through the first level I get freeze, pixels, shrieking. Lockup. Arse.

Luckily we've more than one 360 in the house, so I won't be completely without 360 goodness, and I'll do a check first using a different PSU to see if the fault might be there rather than with the 360 itself, but nonetheless it is a bit of an annoyance. Especially considering that *Dead Rising* is due out any day now, at which time I expect to be doing a lot more 360 lovin' than I have been over the summer months.

Of course there's also Nintendo's Wii to look forward to now, in the not too distant future. I've still never actually laid a finger on one yet, and yes I know it's just a speeded-up GameCube with a funky controller, but it's actually probably the most intriguing console release of this coming generation, and it's looking likely that it won't break the bank either, which is a nice extra bonus.

I am sure there may well be a few horrors like there have been on the DS where developers shoehorn controls onto the Wii Remote because they feel they ought to rather than because the game demands it, but equally I am sure there will be some that are excellent. Besides, how else will I get to play *Animal Crossing Wii*? Anyway, I am looking forward to finally trying the Wii and finding out if the controller lives up to all the hype.

I do realise that now I will likely get all the Sony fanboys lining up to hate on me once again because I haven't said that I'm preordering a PlayStation 3 yet – fanboys, don't you love 'em? Bless them, they can't even read a largely tongue-in-cheek column without flying into fits of indignant rage. Amazingly, there was even one guy who took the time to email me and tell me to "shut my beard", which I thought was excellent.

Fanboys are really the idiots of the gaming universe. Me, I'm just a gamer. I don't owe any allegiance to any particular console manufacturer. The ox360 has some games that I like, and has Live Arcade which I really enjoy. The Wii is different enough and will likely be on sale cheap enough that I can pick one up and give it a try without needing to flog off any of the sheepies.

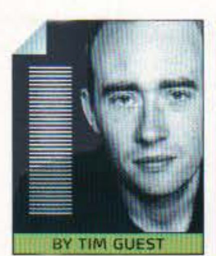
I'm not saying that the PS3 is rubbish (in fact in that article I said I was certain it would be quite good), nor am I saying that Sony is rubbish or that the games are rubbish – only that if I am going to drop several hundred notes on a new console then there had better be at least a couple of super excellent games that I really want to play on it, and I haven't seen those games yet. Which isn't to say that they won't come – I am sure they will – but I don't think it's unreasonable not wishing to spend a large wedge of cash on a new console if there isn't any evidence of anything that is going to float my boat being available to play on it yet. When I see those games then I'll place my order – simple as that.

If anyone should be closing any facial hair it's the fanboys. Jeez, just shut up.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tzoker



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

A WORLD OF YOUR OWN

Dr Henry Jenkins, director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, has called videogames 'virtual play spaces': areas where young adults, in an urbanised world with scarce empty land, can find 'complete freedom of movement' to explore themselves, outside society's moral gaze. But I've never seen as literal an example as that of 17-year-old Todd Robertson. He and his friends, landlocked in the urban sprawl of north London, haven't built a clubhouse or colonised a corner of a favourite pub; they've built their own world.

In July 2004, the official *Lineage II* server files were leaked. Enterprising players realised that, with a little time and a small server, they could run a private version of the game. Two years later, private virtual worlds are a booming business. The most successful private games – L2Extreme, with five different server-worlds, is the largest – have tens of thousands of players.

> With his friends, through hard work and strong political ideals, Robertson has built an entire world. Now he has to manage it

The website Gamers 200 lists the top 200 *Lineage II* websites, and around half are private. Each has a banner advert, with copy like travel brochures, designed to encourage you to visit: 'Shops!' 'Sympathetic ambience!' 'Fishing!'

Robertson's partners started their journey into virtual worlds as a core of three north London schoolfriends. They formed a clan on their favourite firstperson shooter, then swiftly moved to *Lineage II*. They moved to private servers because there they had more fun; you could advance your character faster, and there seemed to be more events, a feeling of exclusivity. As they moved from server to server, conquering each in turn, they kept saying they could do it themselves, and do it better, but nothing came together until one evening another player – who they'd fought alongside in *Lineage II* but never met in real life – liked their ideas and offered to bankroll their server. They made plans, and another friend offered a high-end PC as a testbed. With some basic C++ and a lot of time, they chose a section of the *Lineage II* universe, and sculpted it to their desires.

Then their shadowy financier pulled out. Still, it seemed a shame to waste the work, so they raised the money themselves, rented a server box, christened their new world L2Supremacy and moved in.

Robertson and his friends have had their own server up for a month, and already they have a stable populace of a hundred or so players at peak times. Robertson – known online as 'TØdd' – is the event manager; he holds PvP battles in a custom area they call The Coliseum.

According to Jenkins, the purpose of these new virtual wastelands is to escape the prying eyes and order of society; and in these homebrew virtual worlds, rule-breaking, or attempted rule-breaking, is predictably rife. Robertson and his friends have a series of tricks they picked up on their server wanderings; they've added a delay to the login screen to plug one popular loophole, and they've added a series of invisible, nameless creatures, hidden in inaccessible areas below their world, which crash the client when they are clicked on; this stops automated software, like L2Walker, designed to level your character automatically. They have a rival, too: L2Frenzy. They were part of the same clan, until Robertson's group split to build their server; the next day, the other group announced they were forming a server too. The other group has attempted to sabotage L2Supremacy; overloading their website, and hacking into their world with GM privileges to wreak havoc. Robertson insists they don't retaliate. "We're doing better than them. As long as we're on top, I don't mind," he told me.

Robertson's sister worries about the time he spends in virtual worlds; I don't. He's at the forefront of a new movement that seems set to continue. (In August, the latest *Lineage II* update was also leaked. The rumour Robertson heard was that a NCSoft insider received $10,000; the site which bought the files sold them on for $5,000 – soon it was everywhere.) They have their own cash to manage. Server space and bandwidth cost money, so most private servers offer their players the chance to 'donate'. Most donations are rewarded with gifts of powerful items, so a £25 gift on L2Extreme can give you a real in-game advantage. The donation process is very popular – and cheap compared to playing the retail game. Some servers, then, make a lot of money. (L2Extreme reportedly pulled in $24,000 in one week, and it regularly closes donations to catch up on delivering the gifts.)

With his friends, through hard work and strong political ideals, Robertson has built an entire world. Now he has to manage it. They hope for as many players as possible, so they've realised they must slow the supply of powerful items by raising the prices, so new players aren't at a total disadvantage. They're learning management skills, too: they need new GMs, and TØdd's currently interviewing. He asks questions like: "If you told someone to stop doing something, and they immediately did it again, what would you do?" (The correct answer, of course, is: "Turn them to stone.")

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net



BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

DOES GAMING NEED CELEBRITIES?

BY MR BIFFO

It's an issue that has been debated for years, not least in a recent article by gaming celebrity Dave 'The One With The Bandana' Perry. In the article, Perry argued that the games industry is in desperate need of a new generation of gaming celebrities. Heck, he was even kind enough to name-check yours truly as a last-gen gaming celebrity ('washed-up hack' by all means... but celebrity? I think not).

Nevertheless, during the '90s gaming boom the we-need-celebrities thing wasn't even an issue. Helped by the TV industry's bandwagon-jumping there really were genuine gaming celebrities; Violet Berlin, Dominik Diamond, and – shudder my nuts off – Ben 'the' Boffin. Then on the next rung we had Sega champ Danny Curley, and Big Boy Barry, and – whether you agree with journalists cultivating a celebrity persona by having photo bylines or not – Julian 'Jaz' Rignall and Radion Automatic.

> Why do we need celebrities when Sony and Microsoft are quite capable of marketing the heck out of their systems?

You can argue until your lungs turn blue whether a journalist really can become a celebrity, but now that I'm a little bit older I can sort of understand it. My daughter clearly reveres the editorial team on the Official Nintendo Magazine as gods, and often quotes from the magazine as if it were a religious text.

Heck, if I'm honest I once saw Julian Rignall in a games shop on Oxford Street, and was so star-struck that I followed him to a cashpoint – at that time the closest I ever came to mugging, and debagging, someone famous. One time I even got excited, in a purely heterosexual sense, when I saw Neil 'Who?' West's old chap when I went to the toilet next to him. So, I can understand why games journalists can be raised to the level of celebrity. I just don't think it's necessary for the health of the industry.

You might enjoy a games review, but it seems a little absurd to celebrate someone just because they're capable of doing the job they were employed to do. The ridiculous less-said-about-it-the-better wankery of New Games Journalism aside or not.

There may not be the media hysteria of the early to mid-'90s, but there's more money floating around than there ever was. Why do we need celebrities when Sony and Microsoft are quite capable of marketing the heck out of their systems? I'd argue that the industry desperately needs some stronger, more iconic characters – along the lines of Sonic or Lara – but that's an entirely different debate.

I always remember hearing a possibly apocryphal story about how Andrew Ridgeley – in his post-Wham! days – would stumble out of clubs and kick up a big stink about having his privacy invaded by the paparazzi, despite clearly expecting and wanting – needing – to be photographed. On one occasion the assembled snappers were so sick of his behaviour that they agreed among themselves to down tools when Ridgeley emerged, and when they duly did the faded star was crushed. He apparently disappeared from public view shortly after.

At the end of the day celebrity is entirely self-serving. People may feel the need to become celebrities – and in the '90s you could become a gaming celebrity with the minimum of effort (all you needed was to be grossly overweight, a girl, wear a funny hat or give yourself a stupid name...) but the games industry doesn't need people to become celebrities. I simply don't see the benefit.

It's not like film, TV or music where the product is often linked to star talent. Games, generally, are committee-led affairs – these days perhaps more than is entirely healthy – but the product should always be the game, not the people who made it.

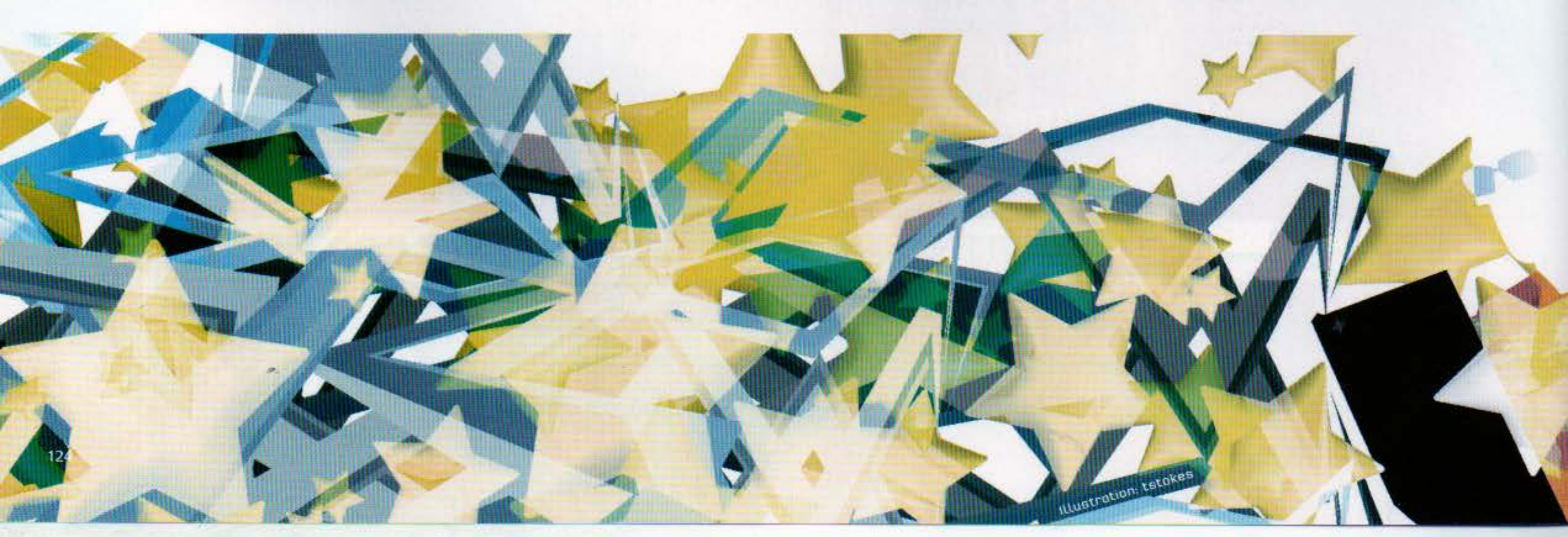
So where are the gaming celebrities now? There are certain games journos who are better known than others – Kieron Gillen springs immediately to mind – but they're not celebrities in the way they were a decade ago. Rightly, Shigeru Miyamoto remains an idol to millions, and Peter Molyneux is probably the UK's highest profile gaming figure (though hardly famous in the way, say, Jordan is – even following his recent breast enhancement). My fellow columnist Jeff Minter is a cult figure with a devoted following, but I'd be surprised if he thought of himself as a celebrity.

Of the old guard, the Games Animal is still hanging in there – his website is a shrine to his glory days presenting Games World (whereas my own website – that's www.mrbiffo.com, if you're interested – avoids mention of my gaming past, in the same way Jonathan King's tries to downplay certain events in his life).

'Jaz' Rignall moved to America, Violet Berlin became a mummy (in the maternal sense, rather than the brains-pulled-out-of-her-nose-and-walled-up-inside-a-pyramid sense), Matthew Smith pops up at retro gaming events, Big Boy Barry moved into PR, and Ben the Boffin sold more than 50 million albums worldwide before developing a debilitating heroin addiction, marrying Courtney Love and blowing his head off in a room above the garage at his Seattle home.

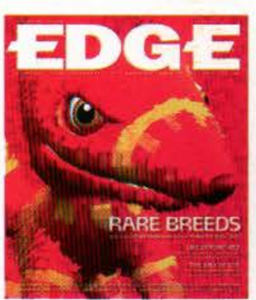
It's not really plausible, is it?

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television





Inbox



Issue 167

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Endgame Rewards
What do you like to be rewarded with when you complete a game? New modes, new characters, artwork, or just a credits list? I like new modes myself, as I don't really use extra characters as, for example in a racing game, I have my 'favourites' and I rarely change from them.
Spindash

My favourite endgame reward is for there to be no more game: for it to end. Take a look at the all-time favourites thread here. Many of those are Nintendo games that, when you finish them, don't just stop, they lock the machine so you've no choice but to switch it off, get up, and walk away, full of exhaustion, pride and sadness. Unlockables are the enemy of closure, a cheap tart's trick to make up for an experince that didn't satisfy on its own terms. Actually, *World Of WarCraft* is the enemy of closure, but I don't want to go into that right now.
Oli

As an aspiring writer with many huge hopes, I find myself sympathising with David Martin's letter (Inbox, **E**166) about writers in videogames, and how little demand there seems to be for them. But I doubt this problem will ever be assuaged for us writers.

If games are indeed 'chemistry sets' that allow people to explore freely within the confines of a structure, then the writer's job may be seen as the mediator of the game's confines; the person who chooses how far you can push the structure while maintaining an effective story. This, of course, leaves any game open to criticism: some people prefer more control, others like to be lead by the hand. The problem with Daragh McDowell's (Inbox, **E**167) interpretation of the story as a 'globe' is its immensity and, as **Edge** rightly points out, the fact that this detracts from a game actually being a story: if everyone experiences something different to everyone else in a game, then this is largely down to the game designers and not the poor people who are attempting to get a semblance of structure into the game (the writers).

To my mind, the key terms are exposition and motivation. The player needs motivation to proceed in the game, and this is provided by the elements of the game that are presented to them in whatever form (exposition). Most often, particularly in FPS games, motivation comes from giving the player mission objectives and locations to proceed to, with the game then taking place essentially between the story elements. Almost every game does this, from *Oblivion* to *Half-Life 2* to *Resident Evil 4*. Is it not possible to design a game that tailors its story around a game's cause and effect scenarios, creating the illusion of story elements from the player's reaction to exposition in order to provide motivation for the player? A narrative can, after all, be more effectively achieved if the story is unfolding in front of the player, and not in segments of exposition that break up the rhythm.

Of course, scripting is not to everyone's taste, that is clear already (and the reason why writers are not in such great demand). But for the gamers searching for a well-considered story, the next step may just be to build the story around them and let them find out how good it is by themselves.
Ambrus Veres

"Even some of the worst films pace themselves well. Why can't games? And it's more than just having an easy level at the start, a harder level at the end"

I have a problem. It's a problem that didn't seem to be a problem once. Narrative has started to become so much more embedded in and important to videogames, in terms of interaction and structure, and they seem to have left one of the most important elements of it behind. Pacing. It's an issue that seems to have started being addressed – acutely so in the case of some games. And it's something that a few people in recent **Edge** interviews and features have talked and thought about in a serious way. They seem to be in the minority, however, but it's something that needs to be thought and talked about more.

Games want to be like movies, they say. And there's a fair amount of evidence to support that. But all they seem to want to learn form is the action, the bang and buck, and some prettier cinematography. Even some of the worst films pace themselves well. Why can't games? And it's more than just having an easy level at the start, a harder level at the end with a boss and some different-coloured explosions.

Still, it's not all bad. *Resident Evil 4*. Loved it. Every moment of it. What I liked most was how amazingly considered every last moment was throughout the levels as a whole and independently. The difficulty, the level of progression, the consideration of set-pieces – when and how they occur, graphically – everything was paced so brilliantly. And I think, because of that, I enjoyed every moment of it.

New Super Mario Bros is another good example. Every level, the structure of them and how they fit together, how the essence of play changes throughout the whole game as the experience evolves is fantastic.

I'm not suggesting it's easy. I imagine it's a hell of a lot easier to set the pace of a story that's set to page or film. After all, no one else can change it or make any choices about what will happen once it's out there. But pacing can be managed in so many more ways



Win a DS Lite for the best letter



with videogames. Forget film. Look to TV. Think about how much consideration goes into the pacing of each episode and series to make you keep coming back. Pour that attention into videogames and it'd make one hell of a difference.
Raph Perks

Perhaps pacing could be improved if developers could access detailed data on how players progress through games via Xbox Live or similar online systems.


Raph Perks found the pacing of *Resident Evil 4* near perfect, and asks why more games don't make more effort to match it sense of timing

In response to the letter in your last issue from the guy referring to girl gamers – WHAT ARE YOU ON ABOUT? I've never heard such a load of rubbish in my life. He suggested that more games like *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossing* would attract girl gamers as we apparently are far too sensitive to worry our pretty little heads about going on killing sprees and beating the crap out of people. As a female gamer who has probably been playing games since before he was born I thought I should protest! Yes we are different from men, yes we are more organised as he says. But men being more competitive and stubborn? The most competitive and stubborn people I know are women, including myself. Most of my favourite games include violence and gore and I could probably kick his arse at them. Wake up and realise we're in 2006. With all the talk of mammoth-spears it seems as though he's living in the past – although something tells me he'd be as rubbish at spearing a mammoth as he is at social commentary!
Sarah Keane

There has been little said of the real world applications of years of videogame-playing experience so here is my two bits' worth. While on a teambuilding exercise with a large oil company, my colleagues and I were asked to compete against each other in a variety of adventure pursuits. After testing ourselves at clay pigeon shooting, kayaking and abseiling our final task was revealed to be dune buggy racing. As the only non-driver in my department it seemed my chances of winning were ruined. However the layout of the track in the farmer's field – a figure of eight around two hay bales 100 metres apart – reminded me of the simple track found at the start of most racing games. So with no knowledge of real driving techniques I astonished my competitors by performing a standard powerslide round each of the hay bales by stamping on the brake (B button), turning hard left to whip the back-end out (D-pad left) and then stamping on the accelerator (A button) to power out of the turn. Needless to say I won the cup but sadly never saved the princess.
Ben Keegan

Who needs a princess when you've won this month's DS Lite?

"I'm feeling a mix of polite admiration and indifference. Sure it's all shiny and new, but I'm left feeling slightly deflated by my early 360 experiences"

I recently became the (counts on fingers) tenth person living in Japan to buy an Xbox 360, and I'm feeling a mix of polite admiration and indifference toward the thing. Sure it's all shiny and new, but I'm left feeling slightly deflated by my early 360 experiences. Not because of the old 'it's just the same as five/ten/20 years ago' argument (though it certainly holds for something like *Ridge Racer 6* complete with 1995 'DJ') or because the joypads have the triggers and bumpers too close together for my fat fingers so I keep changing views in *PGR3* by accident, but because generally I've never had so much hassle in trying to play the games the way they were meant to be played.

I've grown to accept that my TV won't do the new generations as much justice as the expensive HDMI sets on display at the electrical stores for shocking prices, but what gets to me is that despite having a broadband connection I am denied Live. I live in an apartment which has internet and cable TV provided to it for free, but which apparently doesn't have the capacity to support online console gaming. Since the company that runs such apartments is reasonably popular, I dare say the same is true for a very large number of Japanese gamers. No wonder Microsoft's machine isn't popular here: the games don't appeal, and if one wants to play them properly, they have to get a new TV AND a new place to live. I enjoy *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Project Gotham*, but keep getting the feeling that the heart of the game is something I can't play.

A friend calls himself a lapsed hardcore gamer. The new generation, he says, doesn't interest him because it's too much effort to get everything running properly. The concept of 'plug and play' doesn't exist any more. I'm beginning to agree with him.
Chris Charlton

This is a key issue, particularly in Japan, and makes the upcoming face-off between the hi-tech PS3 and the low-fi Wii the first truly philosophical rivalry in gaming history

Any gamer who has kept his ear relatively close to the ground can't have failed to hear of Jack Thompson, the proclaimed 'crusader' against violent videogames. He has, as much through his own threats and outlandish statements as anything else, become a hated figure amongst the gaming community. I myself cannot help but contemplate some of the issues that he has brought to the fore regarding videogame violence. Being forced to consider the nature of that which I play has led me to realise something: we don't need violence in videogames, or rather let me rephrase that: we don't need the kind of gratuitous violence that has been

Continued

F

Topic: Proud to be a gamer?
Are you proud to be a gamer, or is it something you openly tell people when they ask you what your interests are? When I meet new people and we talk about interests and stuff I happily mention I like football, tennis, reading, movies but I always leave out that I enjoy playing games on Dreamcast/ Xbox/PS2. There's still the perception that it is geeky and nerdy and for kids and nothing will ever change that.
Devil Man

Remember kids, when we meet up for drinks, get our stories straight – we're an anti-terror dawn raid hit squad having our first day off since 9/11/01. We use code names because we don't fucking know our real identities. We're not sad geeks who chat on a games forum.
Dr Gonzo

I've never met an attractive girl who likes videogaming. But then again I'm usually not talking to the attractive ones anyway, just observing them from afar. With my telescope, and night-vision googles – kind of like Sam Fisher if his mission objective was to spy on muff rather than save the free world or whatever he's up to these days.
Larry David

If you're afraid to talk about your hobbies then you should definitely sort out your guilt issues. After my ex read some issues of Edge and we had a few chats she appreciated that there can be more to gaming than wasteful child's play and she managed to join in some of my gaming sessions.
buckthorn

Why should I be proud? Pride leads to all kinds of horrible things like hubris and elitism, neither of which have any place in any form of entertainment. Unless you're a jazz musician. Then it's de rigueur.
darthjim

EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER KISSED A GIRL POST IN THIS THREAD SO YOU CAN BE REVERED BY YOUR PEERS BECAUSE GIRLS ARE LIKE AWESOME AND HAVE BOOBS LOL BOOBS shit my dad is coming brb
Unlikely

incorporated into videogames in order to enjoy ourselves. It is that gratuitous violence – violence for violence's sake – which is indefensible and has given the 'anti-gaming community', which some would see Thompson as being the head of, more ammunition.

When franchises like *Soul Calibur* have provided us with a rich beat 'em up experience do we really need the ability to rip out someone's spine in *Mortal Kombat*? Do we really need to cremate someone alive or drill through their eye in *The Punisher* when there are plenty more decent thirdperson action games out there? The *Final Fantasy* series – one of the most lucrative franchises in the industry and one which has always been close to my heart – has rarely ever ventured into 'adult' territory and remains successful.

The *GTA* series, always exhibit A in these arguments, is a guilty pleasure of mine, but I have to wonder whether the fun which is gained from seeing how long I can pavement drive before getting gunned down by the police is really worth the bad press the industry gets from such violence which isn't, in the big picture, really necessary.

One thing I'm hearing more and more of is the need for the industry to innovate and appeal to a wider audience. I hear gamers constantly hoping that gaming will come out of obscurity and into the mainstream. I also find myself wondering more and more that perhaps if we didn't cling to childish notions of violence for the sake of violence then the gaming community might just been seen as just a little more adult, if only by a few. We don't need gratuitous violence – or, in some cases, any violence – in videogames for them to be good, many titles have proven that, and perhaps if developers weren't to focus on it so much we'd see some real innovation instead of God knows what controversy-sparking 'innovation' will come next.

We may well rally against Thompson and others wholly or partially of his mind, but I think we ought to ask ourselves exactly how much we should value the needless violence which we defend in doing so. I will never support strict censorship, but perhaps it's time for us to entertain the view that needless violence is the past, and finding new ways to make games enjoyable and accessible to the public at large without having to fall back upon it is the future.
Toby Marshall

It's not less violence that games need, but more variety. But is the problem bloodlust, or a lack of imagination?



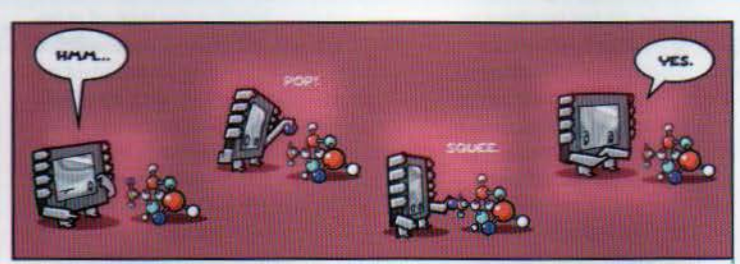
Topic: Blatant Videogame Lies
I was thinking, recently, about how I was duped into purchasing a rather expensive lump of plastic called an Atari Jaguar. Granted, I was youngish, and Edge – as they had a habit of doing – extolled the virtues of the console and didn't focus on the negatives – which didn't help.
Griff

I can remember being told that you could complete *Gauntlet* but after reaching about level 500 on my Amstrad the monitor made a pop sound and that was the end of that. 500+ levels? Does anyone know if that game actually had an end?
ScotsWahey

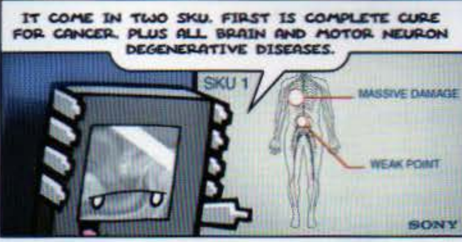
Should we exclude Peter Molyneux from this discussion? He doesn't *mean* to lie, he just says stuff that won't ever happen.
Pause

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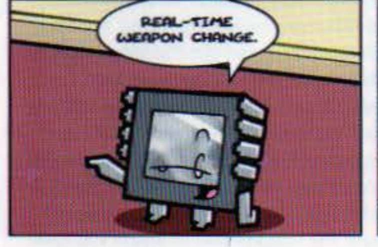


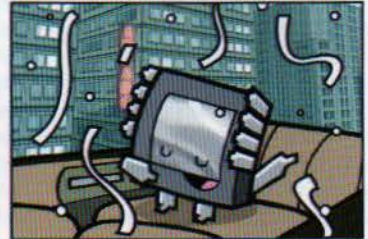


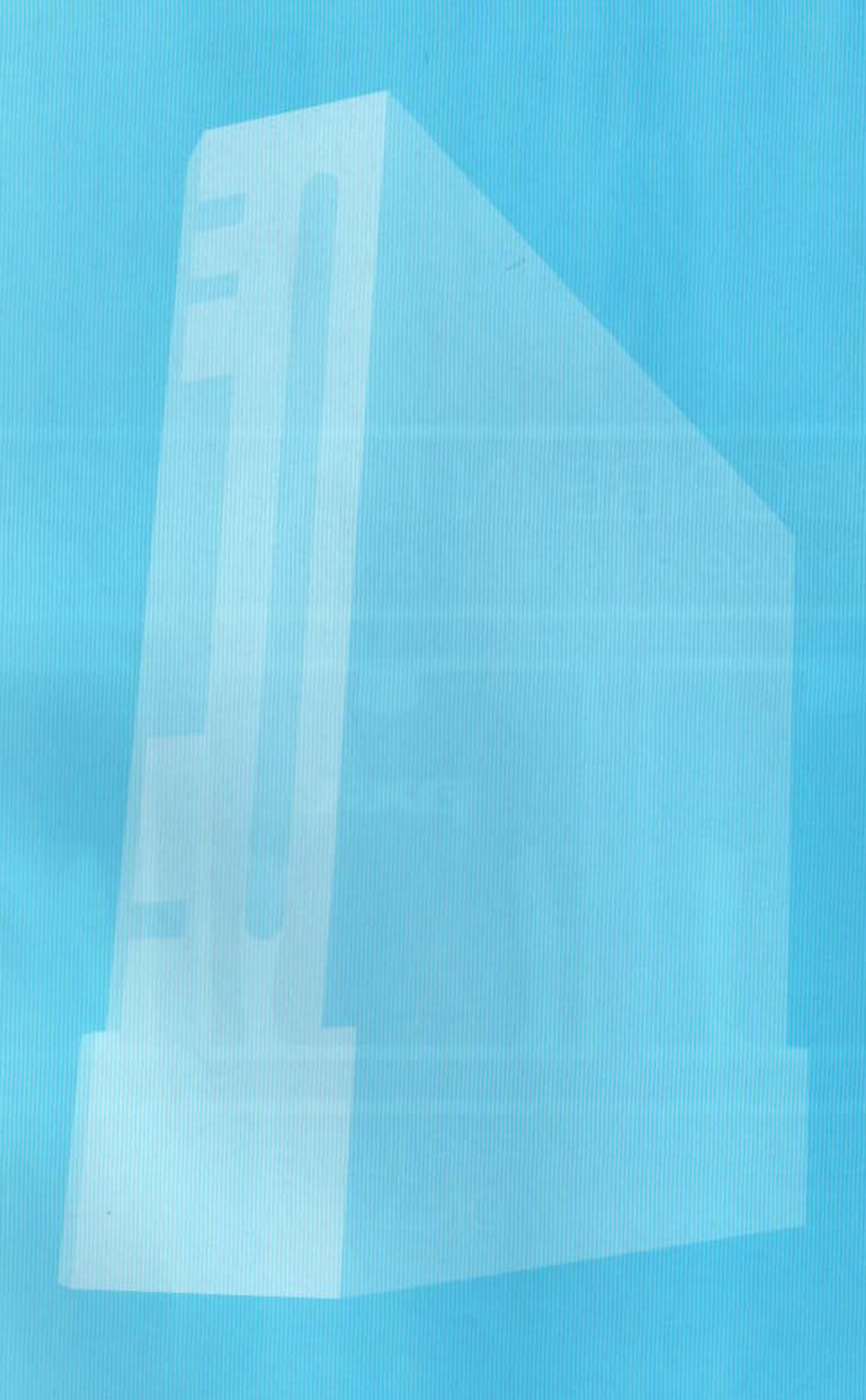












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